ORGANIZED LABOR AND THE POLITICS OF RIGHT-WING HEGEMONY IN INDIA

by
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Abstract
In recent years, there has been an explosion of interest in the right-wing's ability to attract the support of workers around the world. Right-wing movements are generally conceived as movements that mobilize and represent the interests of dominant ethnic, racial or religious groups. Oftentimes, these movements are accused of evading issues of class inequality; in many cases, they are accused of directly supporting elite classes at the expense of lower classes. While the working class' numerical majority makes it an obvious target for any political movement seeking popularity, questions remain as to exactly how they appeal to workers' interests and attain workers' trust. This dissertation draws on twenty-one months of ethnographic observation and seventy-seven interviews with rank-and-file members and leaders of India's largest labor union, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS), which is part of the right-wing Hindu nationalist movement. I use the BMS as a lens into how right-wing political actors secure the support of workers by mobilizing them along economic and cultural dimensions of workers' identities. I theorize Hindu nationalism as a right-wing hegemony that is comprised of two analytically distinct historical phases: building and maintaining hegemony. In the "building phase" of hegemony, I find that the BMS appeals to workers in a progressive manner: it vigorously organizes labor at the grassroots and supports workers in militant collective actions as a way to secure economic benefits for them in defiance of Hindu nationalist strictures against class conflict. In the "maintaining phase" of hegemonic consolidation, the BMS has a regressive orientation that does little to address the economic grievances of its rank-and-file members and uses Hindu nationalism to coerce workers into complying with the imperatives of economic growth. The very union that acted as a vehicle for consent and for legitimizing the hegemonic claims of Hindu

nationalism in the building phase becomes a vehicle for coercion and for subordinating workers' class interests in the maintaining phase of hegemony. My dissertation thus demonstrates that right-wing hegemonies are harder to sustain than they are to build due to the contradictions that arise between class and nation.

First Reader/Advisor: Professor Rina Agarwala

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to Guillaume Sublet, and my parents, Neeta and Shiv Raj Upadhyay.

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Acronyms

ABVP	Akhil Bharatiya Vidarthi Parishad
AITUC	All-India Trade Union Congress
BJP	Bharatiya Janata Party
BJS	Bharatiya Jan Sangh
BKS	Bharitya Kisan Sangh
BMS	Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh
BTP	Bharatiya Tribal Party
BTS	Bhilistan Tiger Sena
CITU	Center for Indian Trade Unions
CPI	Communist Party of India
CPI (M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist)
HMP	Hind Mazdoor Panchayat
HMS	Hind Mazdoor Sabha
INC	Indian National Congress Party
INTUC	Indian National Trade Union Congress
IPCL	Indian Petrochemicals Corporation Limited
KHAM	Kshatriya, Harijan, Adivasi Muslim
LDF	Left Democratic Front
ONGC	Oil and Natural Gas Corporation
RSS	Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh
SJM	Swadeshi Jagran Manch
UDF	United Democratic Front
VHP	Vishwa Hindu Parishad

Chapter 1: Introduction

In recent years, there has been an explosion of interest in the right-wing's ability to attract the support of workers in several countries around the world. Right-wing movements are generally conceived as movements that mobilize and represent the interests of dominant ethnic, racial or religious groups. Oftentimes, these movements are accused of evading issues of class inequality; in many cases, they are accused of directly supporting elite classes at the expense of lower classes. Therefore, it is not surprising that newspaper headlines reveal bewilderment at the unlikely political romance currently taking place between such right-wing movements and workers. While the working class' numerical majority makes it an obvious target for any political movement seeking popularity, questions remain as to exactly how they appeal to workers' interests and attain workers' trust. How did Donald Trump, a billionaire real estate mogul with no political experience, sweep the white working-class vote in a surprise electoral victory in the 2016 presidential elections in the United States? How are Germany's labor unions with far-right political sympathies attracting support from workers in the traditionally left-dominated labor movement in the automobile industry? And how have right-wing movements in Turkey and Brazil yoked themselves to religious institutions active in working class communities that have traditionally been averse to right-wing movements?

Interestingly, all these movements are making efforts to attract the support of lower classes by emphasizing their economic grievances. In Turkey and Brazil, for example, right-wing movements have leveraged powerful religious themes of salvation and liberation to promise workers freedom from exploitation and material deprivation. In the U.S., conservative thinkers like Oren Cass are calling on Trump to institute collective

bargaining rights for workers (Levitz 2020). In Germany, right-wing unions like Zentrum Automobil have made headway by recognizing workers' insecurities around employment and declining living standards as well as workers' frustrations with established leftist unions, who are thought to be "in bed with the politicians" (Dörre 2018). Given the tendency to associate the right with elite economic interests and to attribute its current popularity with workers to cultural, religious, or moral appeals, the right-wing's current emphasis on the economic concerns of lower classes is puzzling. Why and how is this happening? And how are these appeals sustained in the face of potentially conflicting economic interests between the elite classes who have historically supported the right and the workers who are part of the right's newfound lower-class orientation?

Beyond the Dichotomy of Economy Versus Culture

I argue that economic promises, like recognizing collective bargaining, securing employment guarantees, or even the loftier undertaking of freedom from exploitation, that right-wing movements and parties make to certain groups of workers should be understood as attempts by right-wing political actors to forge a class compromise. More than just a strategy for winning elections, right-wing class compromises are part of a larger and more ambitious political project of consolidating hegemony. More specifically, right-wing class compromises can be understood as a part of a political toolkit for building and maintaining hegemonic power. Drawing on Gramsci (1971), I define right-wing hegemony as the capacity of right-wing political actors (either parties or movements) to present the interests of a majoritarian identity group as the interests of all classes within that identity group. Right-wing class compromises, like class compromises brokered across the political spectrum, rest on a combination of economic and ideological

appeals. Under a right-wing class compromise, workers support the right-wing not only because this support offers them material benefits, but also because it can empower them ideologically, even as they remain in subordinate class positions within the right-wing hegemonic project. Incorporating workers into a right-wing class compromise results in a political bond that is more sophisticated than bait-and-switch strategies that use culture to deflect from workers' economic grievances or those based on quid-pro-quo exchanges of votes for material concessions. When the right-wing is able to broker a class compromise, this can bolster right-wing power in a more durable way than appeals that are made only along the singular dimension of either culture or economy.

Yet, maintaining such a compromise is no easy feat. Like class compromises in general, right-wing class compromises rest on a delicate balance of maintaining profitability and legitimacy (Arrighi 1978; Burawoy 1979; Przeworski 1985; Silver 2003; Wright 2000). This balance often rests on strategies of drawing boundaries that exclude certain groups from receiving the material and ideological benefits afforded by the class compromise (Silver 2003). In the case of the 20th century, the New Deal in the United States, post-war Keynesian reconstruction in Western Europe, or state-planned industrialization in the post-colonial world, are examples of class compromises forged on a national scale that were based on the exclusion of people of color, migrants, or large sections of the rural population. This exclusion was often obscured by political actors through a mix of liberal claims that professed political equality and promised political inclusion to all citizens, and modernization which tried to address economic inequality by promising the eventual economic inclusion of those citizens left out of the class compromise. Right-wing class compromises, on the other hand, differ from other national-level class compromises in

that exclusion and boundary-drawing are far more explicit. Right-wing class compromises are based on the explicit exclusion or subordination of minority identity groups.

Thus, right-wing actors must continually make efforts to forge inter-class unity and inter-ethnic disunity along majoritarian (ethnic, racial, or religious) identity lines and maintain disunity across lower classes. This is a difficult task and one that subjects right-wing class compromises and hegemonic projects more broadly to greater instability than those forged by leftist or centrist political actors. Right-wing hegemonies promise inclusion to a smaller subset of the citizenry and might ease concerns regarding the profitability of the class compromise, but because this subset is a dominant identity group, the right-wing political actors have to do more work to uphold or compensate the perceived supremacy of this group. Furthermore, growing class inequality has the potential to undermine boundaries drawn along on the axis of majoritarian group identity. Workers included in the majoritarian identity group may find that their material conditions overlap more with excluded workers than with their co-ethnics in elite classes. If the common class interests motivate included workers to form political bonds with excluded workers, this could undermine right-wing class compromises and even destabilize right-wing hegemony. In response, right-wing actors may resort to coercive means to re-draw boundaries. These outcomes are of course contingent on the agency of right-wing political elites and workers, and thus must be evaluated empirically.

The case of the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS)

To better understand the unwieldy dynamics of right-wing power, this dissertation studies the case of a right-wing labor union in India, the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS). The BMS is the largest trade union in India, and with a claimed membership of over 17 million workers, it is also one of the largest labor unions in the world. My study shows that the BMS contributes to the process of consolidating Hindu right-wing hegemony by offering its members a combination of material concessions and ideological empowerment. In terms of material concessions, the BMS acts much like other unions in India by supporting collective bargaining with their employers in the case of formally employed workers and in securing welfare benefits from the state in the case of informally employed workers.[1] In terms of ideological appeals, the BMS simultaneously empowers and disciplines its members by mobilizing them as "citizen-workers." The BMS organizes labor as citizen-workers who are not merely inputs in production, but are elevated politically, socially, and spiritually as agents of progress and development of the Hindu nation. Secular nationalist labor leaders who organized workers as part of India's postcolonial state-building project in the early 20th century also used nationalism to secure workers' cooperation with economic production while empowering them as agents of national development (Nair 2016). The BMS differs in its attempt to infuse a spiritual

[1] Informal workers are defined by unregulated or unofficially recognized work contracts and include several groups, including contract workers or self-employed workers (Agarwala 2013). Informal workers form an important part of the BMS's membership ranks. According to Datt (2008), the BMS represents close to 19% of unionized informal workers.

dimension to its nationalist ideology, including the idioms it uses to motivate workers to dutifully participate in national development and the definition of the "nation" that is to be developed. My study of the BMS reveals important temporal variation in the BMS's ability to uphold this articulated identity of the Hindu national citizen-worker. I find that it is harder for the BMS to maintain the consent of its members the more the Hindu right's power is entrenched in the state. Thus, right-wing hegemonies are harder to maintain than they are to build because contradictions between class and right-wing majoritarian ideologies become more pronounced once the right-wing has the reins of state power in its hands.

Although right-wing labor unions are rare, right-wing movements in other countries have mobilized support from workers through labor unions. In the United States, for instance, the Ku Klux Klan has periodically made forays into organizing white factory workers throughout the 20th century (Pegram 2018; Wells 1986), while in South Africa, in the 1940s, Christian nationalists launched a short-lived "assault" on the labor movement by creating a union especially for white Afrikaner workers in the railway and mining sectors (O'Meara 1978). The Indian case of the BMS stands apart from these instances in part because of its size and its long history.[2]

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[2] The Confederation of Righteous Trade Unions (HAK-İŞ) in Turkey is similar to the BMS but has both a shorter history and occupies a more subordinate position in the labor movement in terms of its membership size. It was formed in 1976 as an ally of the Islamist National Salvation Party (MSP) in response to the rise of a strong leftist opposition in Turkey at the time. While some scholars dismiss the HAK-İŞ as an ineffective union, others suggest that it has recently become salient in Turkish politics due to its alliance with the ruling right-wing Justice and Development Party.

The BMS is part of the Hindu nationalist movement in India, which is made up of a family of organizations commonly known as the Sangh Parivar (see Figure 1). The Sangh is made up of over three dozen organizations representing different interest groups including students, farmers, and women. The commanding heights of the Hindu right-wing hegemonic bloc are occupied by the founding member of the Sangh Parivar, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the current ruling political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). The RSS is the patriarch of the Sangh Parivar, while the BJP is the Sangh's most prominent member today. Like most right-wing movements across the globe, Hindu nationalists in India claim to protect and further the interests of the nation's dominant ethno-religious identity group—in this case, Hindus. Hindus in India make up a demographic majority—comprising nearly 80% of the Indian population—but they are also dominant in terms of their socio-economic status. Hindus fare better than Muslims, India's largest minority religious group, on several human development indicators even when differences along caste lines are taken into account (Government of India 2006a).

In the official rhetoric of the Sangh Parivar, however, Hindu nationality is not simply a religious identity, but rather an identity that is based on common geographic and racial origins and culture (Golwalkar 1966; Sarvarkar 1925). This conceptualization of national identity, known as *Hindutva*, has sometimes been used by members of the Sangh Parivar to justify a model of "inclusion" of certain religious minority groups, such as Muslims and Buddhists, or even marginalized Hindu caste groups, on the condition that they acknowledge that their national origins or cultural practices are rooted in Hindutva. The

movement thus draws a distinction between the religious identity of Hindus and the political identity of the Hindu national, who in theory could be of different faith communities. This rhetoric of inclusion has important ideological and political implications which will be unpacked shortly. For now, it suffices to say that despite the discursive claims of inclusion, the Sangh Parivar's organizations, the BMS included, is dominated by Hindus at the level of leadership but also in the rank-and-file.

The BMS was established in 1955. It gained popularity beginning in the 1980s, a period in which other members of the Sangh also amassed popularity and power, including among lower class groups. Today, the BMS is also among the largest groups within the Sangh Parivar. Curiously, the BMS continued to grow even as the BJP enthusiastically embraced an economic agenda that has exacerbated inequality and hardships for many Indian workers, including those in the membership ranks of its own movement. Much of the existing scholarship on Hindu nationalism's reach among workers has focused primarily on its cultural and religious mobilization as a way to forge inter-class unity or on the way that the BJP has attracted the votes of India's predominately poor electorate by relying on extra-parliamentary welfare provision through charitable organizations. Obscured from this picture, is the quiet rise of the BMS, which has occurred through economic mobilization and engagement with class politics outside of the electoral arena. Today, the BMS is active in every corner of the country and has a presence in all sectors of the economy, including in India's vast informal sector. With a membership base of over 17 million workers (claimed), the BMS is the largest labor union federation in India, a significant feat for a labor movement that has historically been influenced by leftist

traditions and where unions affiliated to the Communist Parties of India are still active. The BMS's size and reach is also of global significance: the BMS underscores that it is the religious right-wing that is at the helm of one of the largest and most successful cases of labor union organizing in the world today.

Contributions of this study

Surprisingly, however, almost no attention has been paid to the rise of the Hindu right-wing in this unlikely arena of labor unions (Jaffrelot 2005; Saxena 1993a are exceptions that provide a good starting point). Most of the scholarship on the Hindu nationalist movement's popularity among lower class groups has focused on either the use of ethno-religious and cultural appeals by non-party organizations of the Sangh or on the BJP's ability to secure votes from India's predominately poor electorate. Scholars have highlighted the role of the violent antagonism of religious differences, most often against Muslims who are stigmatized as a threatening minority group (Basu et al. 1993; Basu 2015; Shah 1970a; Shani 2007), as well as the promises of upward mobility for lower caste Hindus based on their adoption of cultural and religious practices of upper castes, a process that is known as Sanskritization (Jaffrelot 1996). Others, like Hansen (1999), have discussed the "vernacularization" of the religious, linguistic and cultural traditions adopted by the Sangh Parivar, which are primarily based on northern Indian practices, to other regions of India.

The emphasis on cultural appeals emphasizes the deliberate efforts of Hindu right-wing groups to construct a unified block of support along religious lines rather than taking it as a natural outcome based on the demographic majority of Hindus or other notions of

inherent difference between Hindus and other minority religious groups. It also is helpful in highlighting political shifts that occurred in the late 20th century which enabled Hindu nationalists to reap electoral rewards from religious mobilization after several decades of less successful attempts to gain prominence. Scholars have investigated a more general "communalization" of the Indian political sphere, that includes Congress appeals to the Hindu vote in the bloody aftermath of anti-Sikh violence that erupted after Congress Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was assassinated by her Sikh bodyguards in 1984 (Corbridge and Harriss 2000).

Yet, these perspectives are limited in their treatment of the class politics of the Hindu right. To the extent that class is considered in the existing scholarship, the focus is primarily on the appeals to the interests of elite or upper-class Hindus. Some scholars conceptualize the rise of Hindu nationalism and the concomitant liberalization of the Indian economy in the early 1990s as "elite revolts" of upper caste and class Hindus (Corbridge and Harriss 2000). In a similar vein, Rajagopal (2001:3) describes the twin projects of Hindu nationalism and economic liberalization as promising the emancipation of "hidden social forces…whether of the profit motive or of a long-suppressed Hindu religion." Yet, it was not only—or originally— the BJP that embraced economic liberalization in India. The plans for liberal reform of the Indian economy were rolled out and have been enhanced by political parties across the political spectrum, including the centrist parties like the Congress and leftist parties like the Communist parties of India. We thus must expand the strict confinement of the right-wing's class politics to the economic interests of elite groups.

More recent works add an important dimension to the perspectives above by exploring how Hindu nationalist organizations have catered to the economic interests of lower-class groups. Chidambaram (2012), for instance, demonstrates how the BJP has been able to draw on the private provisioning of welfare and social service through its charitable arms as a way to win support among the urban poor despite the party's association with elite economic interests. In part, it was the BJP's decade long losing streak, which began after it headed a coalition government from 1999 to 2004, that piqued the interests of scholars who sought to understand how the BJP made efforts to regain popularity after falling from power. The BJP's efforts paid off in the 2014 elections, which the party won by a landslide. The Hindu right-wing party became the first national-level party to head the Indian government without the backing of a coalition since the 1990s, and the first non-Congress party to do so in Indian history. The BJP's 2014 victory came on the heels of a campaign led by Narendra Modi, the controversial but hugely popular politician from the Indian state of Gujarat. Based on his time in government in Gujarat, Modi promised corruption-free governance, inclusive development, and India's assertion on the global scale as an economic superpower. Thachil (2014:284) argues that charitable welfare provisioning by the non-party groups of the Sangh were essential in moderating the elite image of the BJP and played a role in setting the stage for the party's triumph in 2014. Other scholars have explored how the BJP's self-identification as the party responsible for India's rapid economic development at the sub-national level in states like Gujarat have been used to muster support from lower class groups who want to identify with the party's discursive associations with modernity and progress (Desai and Roy 2016).

These findings begin to shed light on how right-wing movements also develop political engagements with lower class groups in an economic idiom that is based either on charitable welfare provisioning or the promises of economic development. They also illuminate an important dimension of the political subjectivity of lower-class groups because they investigate how these groups respond to the economic appeals that right-wing actors are making. Across these works, scholars find that these strategies have not created "deep and stable preferences for Hindu nationalism" among poor voters (Thachil 2014:27) or have not led to the "clear hegemony of the BJP among subaltern groups" (Desai and Roy 2016:26).

Yet, we still only have a partial view of the full ambit of the right's class politics. Without studying the nearly seven decades-long effort to mobilize workers through the BMS, it is difficult to fully evaluate the nature of workers' "preferences for Hindu nationalism" or the hegemony of the right over subordinated groups. The dearth of research on the BMS is reflective of a methodological and theoretical limitation which stems from the fact that these investigations are based on a snapshot of the Hindu nationalist movement in time. Most of these works do take into account the historical context, but very few analyze the right's rise through the lens of time. In other words, we have a still picture which places the BJP and its recent pivot towards developmentalism in focus. While this picture allows us to recognize some of important features of the political landscape in which the right has gained popularity among workers, it is difficult to see the dynamic relationship between workers and the right and the changing political and social contexts which produce the image of the right's working-class orientation. The

synchronistic perspective in existing works results in a binary understanding of the political subjectivity of lower-class groups who are behind the right-wing's rise. Either this subjectivity is swayed by the stirring of cultural or religious passions because the Hindu right has nothing to offer workers materially, or the subjectivity is cemented on charitable handouts that address workers' economic grievances but fail to enchant them culturally or religiously.

Through a study of the BMS that takes into account its history, its dynamic relationship with other sections of the Sangh Parivar, as well as the political subjectivities of some of the millions of workers who have joined the union, this dissertation aims to further explore the complex imbrication of economic and cultural appeals by right-wing actors. How do right-wing movements and parties reconcile the appeals they make to workers with the appeals they make to elite groups with whom workers' economic interests may be in conflict? Put in the context of the rapid growth in inequality in almost every country in which the right-wing has gained popularity among the lower classes, this becomes a question about the sustainability of the right-wing political project. How does the right sustain its claims to represent all classes within the dominant identity group in the face of growing class inequality? In answering these questions, this dissertation also aims to extend existing explanations of the right's rise among workers by conceptualizing right-wing power as a historical process in which class and culture become fused not just at the level of elite economic interests but also at the level of lower classes.

What's the matter with the right-wing?

The existing scholarship on the contemporary right-wing in other countries tends to reproduce a similar binary perspective on the right's appeals to workers as seen in the Indian literature on Hindu nationalism's popular rise among lower classes. As in India, most of the research tends to focus on the cultural claims deployed by right-wing actors trying to win support from lower class groups. One popular manifestation of this argument is Thomas Frank's (2004) book, *What's the matter with Kansas?* Frank argues that right-wing campaigning by Republicans on explosive cultural and religious issues worked to lure workers, even if Republicans offered them little in terms of addressing their economic grievances. This style of campaigning, or what Frank calls the "Great Backlash", is a cultural reaction on the part of conservative groups to the progressive politics, or "partying and protests" of the late 1960s.

The notion that the right has crested on a wave of cultural backlash is also present in scholarly works. Norris and Inglehart (2019), for instance, find that what drives "once dominant sectors of the population" to support right-wing actors is a cultural resistance to progressive values like opening up national borders to immigration, support for multiculturalism, or the extension of civil liberties, rather than fears of economic insecurity. While they acknowledge that dichotomizing the cultural and economic dimensions of the right's rise is a false construct, Norris and Inglehart do not offer a way to theoretically bridge the gap between the two explanations. Their conclusion that it is "cultural values, combined with several social and demographic factors" leaves little scope for understanding the success of right-wing labor organizing in India, a case that

would fall outside of the purview of their focus on western liberal democracies. It also sheds little light on the incipient rise of right-wing labor organizing in some of the countries that are included in their study, like the United States and Germany.

The false dichotomy between the economic and cultural dimensions of right-wing appeals to workers also characterizes much of the current debate around the nature and rise of right-wing populism. One prominent voice in this discussion argues, that "it's not the economy, stupid!" that defines right-wing populism, but rather the more central ideologies of nativism and authoritarianism (Mudde 2007). Others echo this perspective, arguing that "questions of community and identity [are] clearly more important than economic grievances"(Oesch 2008). On the other side of the debate are scholars who argue that it is resentment among workers who have been "left behind" in enjoying the spoils of economic globalization or most threatened by the unbridling of market forces that propels them to support right-wing populists in Europe who began promising a resurrected, chauvinist welfare state and borders closed off to sources of cheap labor (Betz 1993; Kriesi 1999). Thus, while the category of populism creates space to consider how the right can use both economic and political appeals to attract workers as long as it reinforces the central, defining political antagonism of the "people" or "popular will" versus the "establishment", the current discussion offers little theoretical insight into how we should understand the relations between the two.

The focus on the question of whether it is economics or culture that explains the popularity of the right among workers eschews an important question regarding the

sustainability of right-wing power. There is much fascination in both scholarly work and in public discourse with how workers have furnished the right's spectacular electoral gains, but there is little analysis of how (or whether) claims to workers made on the campaign trail are maintained once the right-wing is elected to power. In the United States, for instance, some commentators have remarked that Donald Trump quickly transformed from the proclaimed advocate of the proletariat while campaigning, only to become a "protectorate of the plutocracy" once he was elected (Levitz 2020). How do workers respond to this about-face? Or, in cases where right-wing parties maintain their commitments to workers, how does the right prevent alienation from its elite supporters whose interests may be in conflict? While elite involvement in the right-wing is not the focus of this dissertation, these questions are nevertheless important because they point to the unresolved issue of sustainability: how will right-wing actors sustain their appeals, whether cultural or economic, to workers in the face of growing class-based inequality that can rent the dominant identity group whose purportedly unified interests they claim to represent?

To answer these questions, we must theorize the rise of the right-wing historically to take into account how it builds and then attempts to maintain its power over subordinate groups. Not only does a historical perspective reflect the empirical reality of changing tenors and variations in the way that right-wing actors appeal to workers, but it also frees us from the dichotomy of "economy-versus-culture" by allowing the two to sometimes work in concert, while at other times work in opposition, sometimes in a dialectic, and at other times independently of one another.

The BMS, because it sits at the intersection of the Hindu nationalist movement, which aims to promote the superiority of a dominant ethno-religious identity group (Hindus), and the labor movement, which aims to promote the interests of a specific class group (labor), offers an illuminating lens into the dynamic interactions between economy and culture. Moreover, its long history provides the temporal scope to investigate how these interactions transform over time. My study of the BMS reveals how the Hindu right-wing develops its own brand and practice of class politics by trying to appeal to the class interests of BMS rank-and-file members and to enchant them ideologically on the basis of their ethno-religious identity. The BMS serves as a vehicle for redistributing economic rewards to workers in the dominant identity group, but also for empowering and disciplining them by linking the economic rewards to an entitlement based on workers' dutiful participation in economic production and national progress. When BMS leaders are able to convince workers of their pivotal role in economic development and the necessity of their dutiful participation in production, I argue that it can also be reassuring for elite classes who support the Hindu right since they too benefit from a smooth functioning economy. In this way, the appeals to workers made through the BMS can serve as a way to cement a class compromise within the Hindu nationalist movement.

Yet, brokering and sustaining such a class compromise is no easy feat. Regardless of the ideology of the ruling party involved in making the class compromise, state coffers can dry out or become otherwise insufficient for sustaining the promises made to different class groups. For the right-wing in particular, there is also a political tension that arises

from its inherently exclusionary ideology. Because right-wing class compromises rest on ensuring that economic benefits are redistributed between classes within the dominant identity group, they also thus require that boundaries are maintained to prevent minority groups from accessing these rewards. I argue that sustaining right-wing class compromises is more difficult because the right not only has to provide rewards to both its elite and working-class supporters, but it also has to maintain the integrity of its dominant political ideology. This requires it to enforce the divide that prevents potential solidarity from forming between groups of the same class, but who are positioned on opposite sides of the right's majoritarian boundaries. Because capitalist accumulation today is increasingly reliant on low-wage labor power that tends to come from minority groups, there is a tension that arises between the political exclusion of these workers, which is fueled by the right's majoritarian ideology, and their economic inclusion, which is fueled by the current organization of production. This tension makes it more important for the right to enforce the boundaries that divide dominant and marginalized group workers if it is to remain in power. How and whether this tension is resolved has important implications for the right's ability to keep a stable hold on power. I thus argue that the right's ability to broker a class compromise becomes more difficult as its power becomes more entrenched.

Hegemony as a conceptual strategy for moving beyond the binary of economics versus culture

To investigate the questions of legitimacy and sustainability that are at the heart of this dissertation, I frame right-wing power as a historical process of consolidating hegemony.

Hegemony is the exercise of power based on the ability of a ruling group to present its particular interests as the interests of the broader society. For Gramsci, hegemony is a tool used by a particular class to exercise power over other groups, but it rests on the ability of the leading class to present a "universal plane" that would transcend class interests and unify even those groups whose interests are hostile to those of the leading class (Gramsci 1971). During the French Revolution, for instance, the ideologies of "equality, fraternity and liberty" propelled by the Jacobins provided a basis for uniting disparate and even antagonistic class groups against the *feudal ancien* regime. Another more recent instance of hegemony can be found in the Indian context. In the early 20th century, Communists in the southern state of Kerala unified subaltern groups of workers and peasants that were divided along religious and caste lines on the universal plane of a mass-based democracy that would liberate these groups from the ascriptive social order and feudal relations of the old regime (Desai 2002; Heller 1999).

Right-wing hegemony, I argue, is distinguished from other hegemonic projects by the nature of its universal plane. For the right-wing, the universal plane is constituted by the notion of the supremacy of the dominant identity group. That is, whereas the examples of Jacobin and Communist-led hegemonies discussed above constructed a universal plane based on ostensibly inclusionary ideologies of liberty and equality or the historic task of instituting mass democracy, Hindu nationalist-led hegemony is premised on an exclusionary majoritarianism asserting the supremacy of a dominant Hindus over minority religious groups, and the historic task of transforming India into an ethnic nation bounded by this dominant group identity.

As in other hegemonies, right-wing hegemonies are undergirded by the material concessions that leading groups offer to the groups it targets for hegemonic incorporation. The extension of such benefits is not simply a matter of quid pro quo exchanges where political parties try to buy support by distributing benefits to poor voters. Instead, political support is secured through the creation of political subjects, which is the outcome of a complex process of "articulating" ideological and cultural dimensions with the economic dimension of the universal plane (Hall 2016).

I conceptualize the BMS as an agent of political articulation. By examining the role of the BMS in politically articulating workers in the Hindu right-wing hegemonic project, I extend the work of political sociologists who have focused on the party as the primary agent of political articulation (De Leon, Desai, and Tuğal 2015). For these scholars, labor unions are one possible "means of articulation" that "parties uniquely possess to politicize social differences that might not otherwise be salient" (De Leon et al. 2015:3).

The primacy given to political parties as sociological actors in the recent Gramscian inspired political sociology is also present in the scholarship on the Indian labor movement. Since the early years of India's post-colonial period, scholars and other observers of India's postcolonial labor movement pointed to the intervention of political parties as a major source of organized labor's weakness (Giri 1958; Johri 1967). In this view, which dominated much of the Indian labor scholarship of the 20th century, organized labor became too fragmented along political lines to organize effective

collective action or too influenced by political "outsiders" who used labor unions to further their political ambitions at the expense of rank-and-file interests (Chibber 2003; Crouch 1966; Kennedy 1966; Raman 1967; Ramaswamy 1988; Rudolph and Rudolph 1998). These insights from labor scholars suggest that political parties have an almost exclusive sway in shaping a particularly instrumental and reduced form of political subjectivity of labor. Other labor scholars have countered some of these arguments by highlighting the role of organized labor in thwarting the large-scale dismantling of India's protective labor legislation (Candland 2001; Teitelbaum 2011).[3] Others have recognized that labor organized by political parties have been able to win gains for their members and institute them on a larger scale for workers in general because of their proximity to political power (Agarwala 2013; Heller 1999; Patel 1987). These insights suggest that workers too may have some role in shaping the process and outcomes of political party engagements with labor.

By including labor unions as an agent of articulation, we can better unearth the dynamics through which workers may also influence the process of political articulation. In his study of the Turkish case of the Islamic right-wing, Tugal (2009) offers a detailed account of how local actors, such as teachers, municipal officials, activists, and

[3] Under Narendra Modi's leadership, the BJP government implemented reforms to Indian labor law in September 2020. At the national-level, Modi's attempt to do away with a number of protective laws regulating wages, social security, occupational safety and working conditions, was met with dissent from several unions, including the BMS, during his first government. Reforms were introduced at the sub-national level in BJP-ruled states like Rajasthan, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, and Gujarat.

intellectuals, shape hegemonic consolidation by integrating civil society to the state. Tugal's focus is on the construction of political subjects and the work of local actors in legitimizing the *political inequality* that exists between the leadership of hegemonic projects and the groups who are being led. Labor unions like the BMS can offer an insightful extension to the study of hegemonic consolidation because they grapple with multiple dimensions of inequality – between the leaders and the led and between the exploiters and the exploited— within hegemonic projects. Like the actors Tugal studies, the BMS exists and conducts its activities in the realm of "political society", "where society organizes to shape state politics, but also to define the nature of the state and political unity" (Tuğal 2009:25). But the BMS also conducts its activities in "economic society", or what would simply be seen as the "base" structure of society in the Marxist lexicon, where groups organize to protect or to further their class interests, also in a way that integrates workers to the state. The BMS thus offers a way to center the political economy in our sociological understanding of the processes of shaping political identities within hegemonic projects.

Framing labor unions as an agent of political articulation also entails the reintroduction of ideology in labor studies. In India, but also more generally, the scholarship on labor has largely eschewed questions of political ideology. Instead, the political imprint of labor has tended to be confined to labor's role in shaping processes of large scale social and political change, like national self-determination or democratization. Where political ideology does factor into the analyses, it is most often confined to historical studies of labor under left or center-left ideologies like communism, socialism, or social democracy.

In the case of scholarship examining labor in the post-Communist, neoliberal era, however, political ideology has largely fallen by the wayside. The marginal role of political ideology in this period is understandable considering that the unbridling of market forces and the attendant political project of neoliberalism entailed labor's ideological deracination. The labor scholarship that emerged in this context instead unearthed new forms of political engagements with state actors and mechanisms for exercising class power devised by labor movements caught in the throes of the neoliberal onslaught.

In the 21st century, and especially in the past decade, labor's political resurrection has largely come at the hands of the right-wing. Recent theoretical interventions of political sociologists inspired by the work of Gramsci and importantly, the pioneering work of Marxists like Stuart Hall in the cultural studies tradition, have been important in carving out the analytical space for considering the role of ideology in shaping political subjectivities of different social groups. While the introduction of Gramscian frameworks and conceptual derivatives in political sociology have shed critical light on the social and cultural processes through which political subjectivities are formed, there has been a tendency to err on the side of political determinism while questions of political economy, capitalism, and class fade to the background. Riley (2015:184) makes the case for re-centering class in the new currents of political sociology, arguing that "to show that politics matters requires the idea of a prepolitical identity, that is, a social class or some equivalent, that could be organized in different ways." The BMS provides an illuminating empirical window into precisely this sort of investigation.

The concept of articulation makes evident that political support is not given, but rather must be produced and maintained. It also highlights the importance of viewing hegemonic projects historically. Since articulations must be sustained by deliberate efforts, it is also the case that these efforts may sometimes falter or fail entirely. Over time, articulations may dissolve or be overthrown in a process of "disarticulation", which can then enable the constructions of new linkages in a process of "rearticulation" (see also De Leon et al. 2015; Hall 2016:121). Since the political articulations that sustain hegemony are constituted and reconstituted through time, it is also the case that hegemony itself must be conceived as changing through time.

Gramsci's own investigation made evident that hegemony must be rooted in a specific historical context. The notion that hegemonies will be constituted and reconstituted through time also suggests that emergent hegemonic projects arise in moments where existing hegemonies are undergoing decline or are otherwise weak and unstable. In the case of hegemonic projects forged at the macro-level of the world system, a historical perspective on the consolidation of hegemonies reveals that the disintegration of existing hegemonies and the period of social and political chaos that ensues have historically preceded the emergence of new hegemonic projects (Arrighi 2009; Arrighi and Silver 1999; Silver and Slater 1999). More specifically, the making and unmaking of social compacts between the leaders of the hegemonic bloc and the subaltern groups being led "have played a decisive role, not just in destroying the strained social foundations of the collapsing hegemonic order, but also in creating the conditions under which new and

more inclusive dominant blocs and social compacts …[become] hegemonic" (Silver and Slater 1999:213–14). Drawing from these insights to study the consolidation of hegemonies at the national scale, we might ask, how are right-wing hegemons conditioned by previous hegemonic projects? Do they fare better when the terrain is groomed by political actors whose projects are closer to their own? In the case of right-wing hegemony over labor, what is the role of the left-wing, which for much of the 20th century had either a direct or indirect influence in shaping most of the major class compromises that existed on a national scale?

The dimension of time underscores an important element that makes hegemony a more robust theoretical basis for understanding the right compared to the frame of populism, which has dominated much of the existing scholarly and popular debate. Populism describes an exercise of political power that is based on the papering over of differences between groups in order to consolidate a unified "popular will" or "national interest", but there is little analytical insight into how this papering over occurs or why the papering over is successful. Often, explanations of the right's contemporary success among lower class groups are based on tautological reasoning: the right is successful because it is populist, and it is this populism that allows it to erase durable inequalities and other differences within the dominant identity group it represents. Hegemony, on the other hand, is premised on a unity that exists alongside oppositional forces and resistance and thus offers a more sophisticated account of political agency of both the ruling (in this case the right-wing) and the ruled (in this case workers). As Hall (2016:170) argues:

> Hegemony does not obliterate the difference between those who rule and those who do not. …On the contrary, it precisely allows for the space in which subordinate and excluded peoples develop political practices and social spaces of their own… It is perfectly compatible with a moment of hegemony to have a substantial area of working-class life, organizations and institutions. It is only necessary to contain the forms of class consciousness and struggle that emerge between us and them.

Thus, studying the BMS allows us to explore how labor unions and the brand of working-class politics they practice become incorporated into Hindu right's attempt to consolidate hegemonic power, and the forms of contention and "containing" that emerge along the way.

The dynamics of contention and containing potential threats to Hindu right-wing hegemony raise important questions about the strategies of boundary-drawing that are used by the BMS in order to help sustain Hindu right-wing hegemony. Officially, the BMS proclaims a commitment to including all workers within its membership, regardless of religious identity. This is in line with the official stance of the Hindu nationalist movement at large, which eschews the question of minority inclusion through concepts such as "Integral Humanism" which claim to be based not on religious conviction, but on an ethno-cultural notion of *Hindutva* and common geographic origins in the Indus valley that would also include Indians of certain religious minority groups. The ambiguity around such concepts, coupled with the difficulty obtaining data on the religious

composition of the BMS base, make it challenging to accurately assess how (or whether) the union is enforcing boundaries between majoritarian and minority ethno-religious identity groups. Yet, it is this very ambiguity that raises an important question: if it is not on the basis of religious identity, how does the BMS produce and uphold the distinction between Hindu national and non-Hindu national workers?

Research Design

I conceptualize the BMS's strategies of construction and maintenance of the political subject of the Hindu national "citizen worker" as occurring in two distinct phases of hegemonic consolidation. I study the Hindu right's building phase of hegemony comparatively across two periods in two different state contexts. The comparison is helpful in delineating the features of the right's consolidation of hegemonic power over workers that stem from the specific phase of the process of consolidation. The comparison looks at the ongoing building phase of hegemony in the southern Indian state of Kerala and the completed phase of building hegemony in the Western state of Gujarat. The Hindu right began building its hegemonic presence in the 1940s and the BMS entered into the space of the labor movement in the late 1960s in both states. In Gujarat, the building phase ended in the 1990s when the Hindu right-wing political party, the BJP, won state power. The cross-state historical comparison is also helpful in analyzing how existing hegemons shape the process of consolidating new hegemonic projects.

Moreover, because Gujarat is a "successful" case of building hegemony, these differences also shed analytical light on possible trajectories for the ongoing process of building hegemony in Kerala. I find that in the building phase of hegemony, the BMS

appeals to workers in a "progressive" manner: it vigorously organizes labor at the grassroots, often seeking those sections of the working class who have been excluded by dominant unions and is willing to defy Hindu nationalist strictures against class conflict by encouraging or supporting workers in militant collective actions as a way to secure economic benefits for workers. The BMS explicitly emphasizes the class power of the workers it tries to unionize by affirming their entitlement to benefits based on their contributions to economic development. It is primarily by affirming its' members class power that the BMS tries to legitimize the hegemonic claim that Hindu nationalism can serve the interests of Hindu workers as well as elites.

In the "maintaining phase" of hegemonic consolidation, which began in Gujarat in the mid 1990s and is ongoing today, the BMS's approach to organizing workers becomes regressive. That is, union leaders are focused more on disciplining their existing members and on containing class conflict than they are on expanding and empowering their base. I find that the union's regressive orientation does little to address the economic grievances of its rank-and-file members and uses Hindu nationalism to coerce workers into complying with the imperatives of economic growth. The very union that acted as a vehicle for consent and for legitimizing the hegemonic claims of Hindu nationalism's universality in the building phase becomes a vehicle for coercion and for subordinating workers' class interests in the maintaining phase of hegemony. My findings show that in Gujarat, despite the dominant position of the BMS in the labor movement and the BJP in state politics, BMS rank-and-file members resist their leaders' efforts to discipline them and in turn are beginning to form bonds of solidarity with workers who are excluded

from the Hindu nationalist hegemonic project, thereby challenging right-wing power in its most entrenched state. Right-wing hegemonies are thus harder to sustain than they are to build.

Gujarat: Building and maintaining right-wing hegemony in a Hindu nationalist stronghold

The Indian state of Gujarat has long been considered a stronghold for the Hindu nationalist movement. It has also been a hotbed of inter-religious conflict, to which Muslims have disproportionally fallen victim, even before the BJP came to power. This is despite the fact that Hindus make up a vast majority (close to 90%) of the population in Gujarat (see Table 1). Muslims comprise less than 10% of the population and are socio-economically marginalized in the state (Government of India 2006a). In Gujarat, the BJP has continuously been elected to power since the mid 1990s. This success, many scholars of Hindu nationalism argue, is premised on the violent antagonism of Indian Muslims in the state under the auspices of the Sangh Parivar and the BJP. This has taken the form of periodic rioting between Hindus and Muslims (Shah 1970a; Varshney and Wilkinson 2006) as well as a pogrom of Muslims in 2002, in which both Sangh groups and the ruling BJP have been accused as perpetrators (Basu 2015). Indeed, a senior leader of one of the main organizations held responsible for the anti-Muslim violence in the 1990s and 2000s, christened Gujarat a "laboratory" for Hindutva-inspired mass mobilization strategies that have been successfully replicated elsewhere (Hindustan Times 2002).

Gujarat is also home to one of India's strongest regional economies thus allowing an investigation of the material bases of right-wing hegemony as well as its organizational

and political dimension. In the comparative literature on regional developmental states in India, Gujarat is considered an anomaly in terms of its success in sustaining high levels of economic growth through manufacturing-based industrialization. Most scholars focus on the close alliances between the state and the industrial bourgeoisie as a feature of class politics in the state that has historically been conducive for industrial growth (Jaffrelot 2019a; Kohli 2012; Sinha 2005). There has been little attention paid to how labor and the politics of redistribution have shaped Gujarat's economic growth, especially since the BJP has come into power. Many scholars argue that the absence of leftist parties and strong links between capital and the state leave little space for labor to assert its influence on politics (Breman 2004; Desai and Roy 2016; Sheth 1968; Sinha 2005). Furthermore, some scholars have also highlighted unique features of caste in Gujarat that have been beneficial to the BJP's rise. The predominance of upwardly mobile middle caste groups, like the Patidars, as well as some upwardly mobile sections of lower castes like Dalits and tribal groups, constitute a large middle class support base that has stabilized the BJP's power in the state (Basu 2015; Jaffrelot 2015; Lobo 2002; Shah 1987, 1998a).

Yet, while they may not be engaging in strikes as often as in other states, this should not prevent the study of the working-class politics that do exist in Gujarat, even if manifests in less militant forms. Workers in Gujarat are in fact relatively highly organized in labor unions compared to other states in India (Government of India 2006b). More importantly for our purposes, the BMS is the largest of the national-level labor unions active in Gujarat. Because we are not yet theoretically equipped to examine the working-class politics of the right, we know very little about the role of workers have played in the

ascent of Hindu nationalism in Gujarat. The fact that the Sangh has managed to produce and sustain support from different classes of Hindus through the BJP and the BMS, thus makes Gujarat an illuminating site for observing how the right reconciles conflicting class interests by constructing an articulated political identity of the Hindu national citizen worker and how it tries to maintain this articulation over time.

I begin my analysis of the BMS's role in building phase of hegemony in Gujarat in 1967. The building phase of right-wing hegemony in Gujarat spans three and a half decades, from 1967 to 1995 when the BJP stabilizes its hold on state power under the leadership of Narendra Modi. From 1995 to the present, right-wing hegemony in Gujarat is in its maintenance phase.

Kerala: A new model for building right-wing hegemony?

The southern Indian state of Kerala is considered to be hostile territory for the Hindu right-wing. Kerala is one of India's most religiously diverse states. It is home to the 6th largest population of Muslims in India, who make up around a quarter of the state's population. Christians make up close to 20% and Hindus the remaining 56% (Government of India 2006a). The BJP has been a marginal political force, with a single seat win in the 2016 state elections counting as its only major electoral victory. Inter-religious conflicts between Hindus and India's minority religious groups have been a rare occurrence, despite large populations of both Christians and Muslims. Connecting these two facts, many scholars argue, is the unique combination of competitive electoral politics and a long history of politicization along class lines, which has left little space for

parties that campaign on cultural issues (Franke and Chasin 1994; Heller 1999; Thachil 2014).

This assumes, however, that right-wing movements cannot and do not secure support from workers by mobilizing them on economic issues. The assumption is present in the analyses of Hindu nationalism in both states. While in Gujarat, it is the absence of leftist parties that is assumed to have created space for right-wing parties to secure support from workers by mobilizing them along cultural lines, in Kerala, it is the presence of the left that is assumed to preclude the growth of the right. Yet in both cases, this conclusion is reached without studying the efforts of the right to mobilize workers by emphasizing their economic interests and grievances. My comparative study of Kerala and Gujarat thus aims to remedy this shortcoming.

To examine how the right produces and sustains the political articulation of citizen-workers, I focus on two actors: leaders and rank-and-file members of the BMS. Union leaders are important in the political articulation process because they are responsible for overseeing the redistribution of economic rewards and for empowering and disciplining workers as agents of progress for the Hindu nation. Rank-and-file workers of the BMS are the main subjects of political articulation and thus can shed light on the question of legitimacy by exposing how articulation is experienced and perceived, as well as whether workers comply with, or contest, the BMS's articulation.

Methodology

I conducted a total of 21 months of fieldwork in India. I made several shorter trips to my field site beginning in 2013, but the bulk of my dissertation fieldwork occurred from 2015 to 2017. I began dissertation fieldwork in the Vadodara district of Gujarat. Vadodara has many of the makings of one of the strongest instances of Hindu nationalist hegemony in India. It is the famed political birthplace of Narendra Modi, who grew in the ranks of the local RSS branch as a regional organizer. Apart from Modi's legacy, Vadodara has been a stronghold of the BJP since the 1990s. It is also home to several high-growth industrial sectors, including petrochemicals, fertilizer, automobile and auto parts, and electronics manufacturing. The BMS's largest membership base in the state of Gujarat is located in Vadodara. With the BMS occupying a dominant position in the labor movement and the BJP overseeing a strong local economy while also securing consistent electoral victories, the Hindu right has indeed seemingly constituted a "universal plane" of Hindu nationalism in that district.

My ethnography of the BMS began with union leaders in Vadodara. I made almost daily visits to the union office and spoke to union leaders about their past experiences organizing workers, their assessments of the current industrial relations climate, and the ideology of the BMS. Sometimes these discussions took the form of semi-structured interviews, but since I had developed personal connections with a small group of senior BMS leaders from an earlier field trip to Vadodara in 2013, I preferred less structured conversations, which typically lasted two to three hours. I construct the historical narrative of the building phase of hegemony based on ethnography and interviews with

an older generation of union leaders in Vadodara who were active in organizing workers during the Hindu right's building phase in Gujarat (1967 to the mid 1990s).

I initially made contacts with rank-and-file members through BMS leaders and once I had earned their trust, I began to meet the rank-and-file members independently of their leaders. I guided our conversations to help me understand workers' experiences with the BMS, their views on BMS leadership, as well as on the different organizations of the Sangh Parivar that were active or prominent in their lives. These discussions allowed me to understand how workers perceived the BMS and how (if at all) they viewed themselves as part of the Hindu nationalist movement. I also attended worker meetings that were organized by workers in the absence, and sometimes direct subversion, of BMS leaders. With a smaller subset of BMS members, I was able to develop close ties with their families as well. I was invited to attend events such as weddings, baby showers, and religious functions, allowing me to gain an extended perspective of the lives of workers. This was especially important since my access to their places of employment was severely restricted. I used the insights I gained from my ethnography of BMS rank-and-file members in order to evaluate the question of legitimacy of Hindu nationalism as a "universal plane" in the right's hegemonic project.

I also attended events organized by the BMS in other cities in Gujarat, including worker-education seminars, union meetings, and demonstrations where I was able to meet members and leaders of the BMS from all five of the zones where the BMS is active in Gujarat. I attended two regional meetings of the tribal workers' wing of the BMS, the

Vanvasi Mazdoor Sangh, which were held in cities in the neighboring state of Madhya Pradesh. I also met with leaders and organizers of the BMS at the national headquarters in New Delhi, India. In total, I conducted 77 interviews with officials, organizers, rank-and-file members of the BMS and RSS.

The comparative framework of my research took shape while I was in the field. It was conversations with BMS leaders in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, and New Delhi that inspired the extension of my fieldwork to Kerala. To my utter surprise, they pointed to Kerala, not as hostile territory for the Hindu right-wing, or as the home of a communist-dominated labor movement, but rather lauded the state as an exemplary case of Hindu nationalist solidarity across different sections of the movement and as a site of some of the most successful labor organizing by the BMS anywhere in the country. To investigate these claims, I made several trips to Kerala from my home base in Vadodara in 2016 and 2017. In Kerala, I travelled to five of the fourteen districts in the state and met with workers and leaders in the BMS. Due to ongoing violent clashes between Hindu nationalists and communists in the state, I had to tread carefully while collecting data. My research plans were often subject to last minute changes according to the concerns of my Hindu nationalist hosts. While this limited me in some respects as I had very little independence while in Kerala, it also meant that I was hosted by leaders of the BMS and the RSS and was able to have more informal conversations with the leaders and their families in their homes in addition to the structured interviews I conducted in union offices and workplaces. In Kerala, I attended demonstrations, membership campaigns, and meetings organized by the BMS. My meetings with workers were always organized

by the BMS, either in the union office, or in the company of a Hindi or English-speaking member of the BMS who was asked to help me with translation.

Overview of findings and roadmap of the dissertation

My study of the BMS in Kerala reveals that the BMS vigorously organizes workers at the grassroots and flouts Hindu nationalist ideological sanctions against class struggle by encouraging workers to flex their power by going on strike. This "progressive" orientation of the BMS helps to secure the support of workers by empowering them ideologically as essential inputs in economic production but also as agents of national progress who are entitled to be rewarded materially on this basis. While in both popular discourse and in scholarly works, it is the "leftward pull" on politics due to the hegemonic position of the communists that would be marshalled to explain why even the Hindu right exhibits a progressive character in its labor organizing in Kerala, my comparative analysis of the building phase in Kerala and Gujarat reveals striking similarities between the two.

Yet, once Hindu nationalists capture and secure their hold on state power, the progressive practices of the BMS gives way to more "regressive" union strategies. That is, union leaders are focused more on disciplining their existing members and on containing class conflict than they are on expanding and empowering their base. My findings show that the union's regressive orientation does little to address the grievances of its rank-and-file members and instead tries to restrain their collective actions to avoid disrupting economic production. The very union that acted as a vehicle for workers' empowerment and

harnessed this power to bolster the claims that Hindu nationalism can serve the interests of all classes of Hindus, is now a vehicle for disciplining workers and subordinating their class interests. As a result, BMS members dejected by the union's regressive policy are now building bridges of solidarity with workers from minority religious groups. There is thus a weakening of unity within the Hindu nationalist movement, but a perceptible strengthening of bonds between workers from different religious communities, even in the context of entrenched Hindu nationalist power in Gujarat.

Chapter 2 analyzes the dynamics of hegemonic consolidation at the national level. Given that the BMS exists as a national labor union federation, its official ideology, positions on economic policy, and many of its campaigns and protests are formulated and organized by the union's national executive leadership. While many of the BMS's features undergo transformations at the subnational level as the subsequent chapters of this dissertation demonstrate, studying them at the national level is helpful in determining the original intentions and idealized versions of these features. It is also relevant for evaluating how union leaders and members at the subnational level subvert or diverge from these standards. Moreover, since the political project of Hindu nationalism aims to engender transformation at the national level and many of the large-scale campaigns undertaken to achieve this aim are also organized accordingly, the national-level perspective in this chapter can help form a blueprint of right-wing hegemony, bringing to the fore the key features of building and maintaining phases of hegemonic consolidation that will be further fleshed out with ethnographic details from the subnational context in the next chapters. Chapter 3 examines how in the seemingly hostile territory of Kerala, the Hindu

right-wing has approached the building phase of hegemony. I compare the BMS' current organizing in Kerala with its past organizing in Gujarat from the 1960s-1990s to demonstrate commonalities in the building phase of the Hindu nationalist hegemony in both states. Comparing the BMS's initial forays during the building phase of each state can help delineate how pre-existing hegemonies condition the consolidation of new hegemonies. Chapter 4 focuses on the maintenance phase of hegemony in Gujarat, which I argue represents Hindu nationalist hegemony in its most advanced position in India. I demonstrate that there are potentially powerful class fissures that might break the surface of the right's entrenched power. By way of conclusion, the last chapter of this dissertation assesses the stability of right-wing power in India and the implications of this study for understanding right-wing movements in both their nascency and maturity in other contexts outside of India.

Chapter 2: Organized Labor and right-wing hegemony in India (1955 to the present)

Overview of Chapter

This chapter presents a history of the BMS from its inception in 1955 to the present. The historical perspective adopted in this chapter reveals two main findings. First, communism and capitalism, and therefore questions of labor and class politics, have played an important role in shaping the hegemonic project of Hindu nationalism. Communism and capitalism have helped define how and from whom Hindu nationalists mobilize support and its ideological vision for economic growth and national development. As I shall demonstrate below, Hindu right-wing forays into the arena of working-class politics through the establishment of the BMS took much inspiration from leftist unions that were active and dominant in the Indian labor movement at the time of the BMS's formation. The Indian left's inadvertently constructive influence on Hindu right-wing approaches to organizing labor suggests that many of the contemporary explanations of the right's growing support from workers as a function of leftist decline must be nuanced. Moreover, this chapter demonstrates that the BMS is not only inspired by the left but has forged alliances with its leftist and centrist opponents in the labor movement, on some occasions even in protest of the economic policies of governments ruled by the BMS's own family member, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). This suggests that the relationship within the right-wing, and between the right-wing and its opponents, is complex. The second major finding presented in this chapter is that BMS has become a quieter, more marginal actor in the Sangh Parivar in recent years despite – or perhaps, because of – its size. I argue that this is the consequence of the increased potential for the BMS to politicize class divisions that would disrupt the integrity of the universal plane of

Hindu nationalism. The disruptive power of the BMS is a function of its growing membership ranks and the force of labor power that it represents, as well as the growing political power held by the Sangh through the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP).

The chapter examines the dynamics of Hindu nationalism's hegemonic consolidation across three main periods. I begin with a prehistory of the Hindu right's hegemonic project by detailing how a line struggle widened its aims from cultural revivalism to a more profound project of social and political transformation. I then examine the role of the BMS in the building phase of hegemonic consolidation, which occurs over a twenty-year period from the mid 1950s when Hindu nationalism develops its civil society presence through the formation of the Sangh Parivar to the late 1970s, when the existing hegemonic project led by the Indian National Congress Party (hereafter Congress) begins to falter. From the late 1970s to the late 1990s, a "chaotic interregnum" takes place in which the Congress's power continues to slip, while the BJP, the main opposition to the Congress Party, is still clamoring for domination. For the BMS, the interregnum marks its transformation from being part of the vanguard of hegemony building to its more backstage role as a stagehand in the spectacular violence against religious minorities that was organized by other members of the Sangh in the 1980s and 1990s. Finally, the maintenance phase of right-wing hegemony is inaugurated by the BJP's electoral victory in 1999, the first time the Hindu right-wing captures state power. Though its reign was relatively short-lived, it was enough to exacerbate tensions between the BMS and the BJP that had already begun to rear their head in transition period. By this time, the BMS had become one of the largest mass organizations in the Sangh Parivar, but paradoxically,

also one of its most marginalized members. I argue that the changing relationship between the BMS and the rest of the Sangh Parivar can be explained by the Hindu right's capture of state power through the BJP, which fundamentally alters how the right orients itself to workers and distinguishes building from maintaining phases of hegemonic consolidation.

The partial plane of Hindu nationalism (1925 to 1955)

As propounded by its founders in the early 20th century, Hindu nationalism began as a cultural project to strengthen Hindu identity in India in the face of what was perceived to be growing political assertiveness of Indian Muslims in the late colonial period (Sarkar 2002). Keshav Balram Hedgewar, a high-caste (Brahmin) man, established the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in Nagpur in 1925 to give concrete organizational form to the ideas of early Hindu nationalist ideologues like Vinayak Damodar Sarvarkar. Hedgewar wanted the RSS to remain distant from formal politics. Instead, he focused on what he considered to be a fundamental precondition for Indian independence: the awakening and cementing of a religious national solidarity among Hindus. To this end, Hedgewar established shakhas, or local branches of the RSS, that would become the primary site for inculcating in Hindus a "burning devotion for *Bharat* (the Hindu nationalist nation-state) and its national ethos" (Golwalkar 1966). Ostensibly, *shakhas* set no barrier to entry along caste or class lines, although their participants were often young men of upper or middle caste backgrounds from well to do families (Andersen and Damle 1987; Curran 1951; Jaffrelot 1996). The activities organized within *shakhas* were the same throughout India to replicate the sense of unity that Hindu nationalists promoted in

their ideology (Andersen and Damle 1987; Jaffrelot 1996). Hindu nationalism thus certainly aimed to be universalizing in this early period, but Hedgewar's disavowal of parliamentary politics and its lack of vision for the economy meant that it also lacked the political and economic bases on which hegemony could be built. The larger ambitions to transform Hindu nationalism into the "universal plane" on which economic and political aims become integrated with its original aim of intellectual and moral unity only develop in the mid 20th century.

In 1948, the RSS was banned by Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru after one of its former members assassinated Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi. The ban created a deep crisis of legitimacy for the organization. The RSS's connection to Gandhi's assassin made it the target of widespread public anger and ostracization. This exacerbated a lack of confidence that had begun to emerge from within the Hindu nationalist movement in the early 1940s when a section of the RSS cadre questioned the strategy of focusing exclusively on individual-level character development within the RSS's *shakha* network as the primary means of establishing Hindu nationalism in India. This "activist" faction of the RSS cadre wished to see the organization adopt a wider program that included organizing different groups such as students, peasants, civil servants, and also workers, in order to exert a wider influence on Indian society (Andersen and Damle 1987). Among the activists were young men who had joined the RSS in response to Golwalkar's call in

1942 to increase the number of full-time organizers (pracharaks[4]). Some were even once supporters (or sympathizers) of the left but were disappointed by the Communist Party of India's (CPI) decision to collaborate with colonial authorities during World War II (Andersen and Damle 1987). Opposing the "activists" were a group of "traditionalists" who were suspicious of extending the RSS's scope too widely (Andersen and Damle 1987).

M.S. Golwalkar, who led the RSS during its first major crisis of legitimacy, eventually ceded to the activists, in part to prevent their further desertion from the RSS and in part to improve the public image of the organization. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the activist cadre of the RSS initiated building a Hindu nationalist presence in civil society. Several major Hindu nationalist outfits were established in this period as different arms of the RSS. The Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) was established in 1949 as the student's wing; the Jan Sangh Party (precursor to the Bharatiya Janata Party, BJP) was established in 1951 as the parliamentary front; and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (BMS) was established in 1955 as the labor union wing.

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[4] *Pracharaks* are a section of the RSS cadre that are highly committed to the Hindu nationalist cause. Unlike the regular *shakha* attendees (known as *swayamsevaks*, or volunteers), *pracharaks* are expected to denounce their personal commitments to their families and careers and maintain celibacy. They are typically represented as charismatic, well-mannered yet austere and disciplined individuals and thus represent the ideal Hindu nationalist citizen. *Pracharaks* are an invaluable resource for Hindu nationalist organizing and are deployed to work as organizing secretaries in the different organizations of the Sangh Parivar. They are sometimes described within the RSS as "missionaries" for Hindu nationalism. They can also be understood as one of the groups of Hindu right-wing "organic intellectuals" in the Gramscian sense.

The establishment of the Sangh Parivar gave Hindu nationalists the civil society presence it needed to pursue the hegemonic aspirations that transcended the narrower cultural aims of the RSS, which focused on character development at the individual level.

The labor of building hegemony (1955-1977)

The Jan Sangh's "constructive programmes" can be seen as an early blueprint for building Hindu right-wing hegemony in civil society. The program served as a guide for "cultural, social, and economic regeneration" and set out an organizational strategy that targeted specifically "those sections of society which need help either because they have been lacking in opportunities and resources, education, leadership, or organization" (Jaffrelot 1996:121). Workers were included in this group as were students, refugees, and marginalized caste groups (known in India as Scheduled Castes or SCs).

Not only were they "lacking in opportunity" but some of the groups identified in the Jan Sangh's "constructive programmes" were already organized by political forces that Hindu nationalists sought to oppose. Communism was a particularly potent threat for the RSS chief Golwalkar because its theory of class struggle represented a divisive political influence that would stand in the way of forging Hindu nationalist unity (Golwalkar 1966). Given that Indian labor and student movements were historically fertile grounds for Indian communism, the BMS and ABVP would undertake the work of repairing these divisions by reorganizing workers and students, respectively, under the banner of Hindu nationalism.

The BMS confronted a labor movement with a strong leftist tradition, although it was the centrist Indian National Trade Union Congress (INTUC), that was the largest union in the Indian labor movement at the time. INTUC was established in 1947. It was the creation of the Congress Party, who established the labor union to demobilize a militant labor movement organized under the auspices of the Communist Party's All-India Trade Union Congress (AITUC) (Chibber 2003). In 1960, INTUC represented over half of Indian workers unionized with the major national-level labor union federations. The BMS represented approximately 15% of this population (see Table 2).

The BMS's strategy for navigating the terrain of the labor movement was contradictory, at times using communism as a foil, and at other times, cozying up with its leftist and centrist competitors in the labor movement. In this way, the prevailing political culture of the labor movement in the 1950s and 1960s acted as both a "constraint and enabler" for the BMS (Ray 1999:7). The enabling force of communism, for instance, acted upon the founder of the BMS, Dattopant Thengadi, in very personal ways. Thengadi had a familial intimacy with Indian Communists. His uncle, Dhundiraj Thengadi, was the president of the communist AITUC in the 1920s (Date 2001).[5] In the 1940s, about fifteen years prior to establishing the BMS, Golwalkar deployed Thengadi to the southern city of Calicut (now Kozhikode) in Malabar, Kerala. Malabar was fertile ground for socialist and

[5] Dhundiraj was also a comrade of S.A. Dange, a founding member of the CPI. Date (2001) reports that Dange was fond of joking that Dattopant Thengadi was the "gift of the communist movement to the RSS."

communist organizing and thus gave Thengadi close range exposure to radical class politics in India. Thengadi offered Golwalkar first-hand accounts of the potency of communist organizing on the ground, which he considered the "enemy number one" of Hindu nationalism (Jaffrelot 1996).

Producing the Hindu national citizen-worker

With these experiences in tow, Thengadi envisioned a national labor union federation that could "rise above the argument of class-struggle, think from the point of view of national integrity, and keep aloof from the un-Indian tendencies of Capitalism and Communism"(Graham 1990:170). Thengadi spearheaded efforts to indigenize the founding narratives and symbolism of the union by rooting them in the "*Bharatiya*" (Hindu nationalist) tradition and corporatist philosophy of "Integral Humanism." Among the principal tenets of Integral Humanism was the rejection of class struggle on the grounds that it had the potential to disintegrate national unity.

The date of the BMS's official promulgation, 23rd of July 1955, was chosen to commemorate the birth anniversary of (Lokmanya) Bal Gangadhar Tilak, an Indian nationalist revered by the BMS as the first modern and decidedly non-Communist labor organizer in the country. Instead of celebrating workers on May 1st as other unions in India (and elsewhere in the world) do, the BMS celebrates workers on Vishwakarma Jayanti, the day of celebrations for Vishwakarma, the Hindu god of craftsmanship and engineering.

Religious themes of sacrifice (*tyag* or *balidan*) and selflessness (*tapasya*) are ubiquitous in the BMS's ideology, symbolism, and organizing practices. For instance, the deep saffron color of the union's flag, like the robes donned by Hindu ascetics (*sadhus*), represents sacrifice and renunciation from the pursuit of material interests. The flag pictures an industrial wheel and a hand gripping a sheaf of grain, the Hindu nationalist analogue to the worker-peasant unity symbolized by the hammer and the sickle (see Figure 5). In BMS offices across the country, an image of Vishwakarma sits alongside a portrait of Dattopant Thengadi, the BMS's founder, and an image of Bharat Mata (the Hindu nationalist depiction of 'Mother India') (see Figure 6).

As part of the BMS's pantheon, Vishwakarma represents a deified Hindu nationalist citizen-worker, the "origin of all laboring and industrial classes…the builder of the earth as well as of Heaven" (Thengadi 1981:69). In the BMS's interpretation of the Vedic myth of Vishwakarma, Vishwakarma was asked by the Hindu Lord Indra to manufacture a weapon to kill Vishwakarma's own son, Vritra, who was wreaking havoc in the kingdom of the gods. In this predicament, Vishwakarma dutifully obliged by producing the weapon that took his son's life in an act of "sincere cooperation…for the sake of the nation" (Thengadi 1981). Far from being a mere laborer bogged down by the mundane interests of his own class or even his own family, or an oppressed political subject of Lord Indra, in the BMS's ideology, Vishwakarma represents a disciplined but empowered Hindu patriot who devoted his labor for the higher purpose of saving the nation, even if this demanded the personal sacrifice of his son. Indeed, in the BMS's view, it is sacrifice that elevates workers to think "outside the orbit of his 'Myself and

Mine'" and forms a basis for solidarity, or a fundamental "one-ness" with other members of the Hindu nation (Thengadi 1981:17). In the BMS's view, this places greater agency on the worker as a force for unification, not just of his class but for the more transcendental purpose of uniting the larger entity of the nation (or in this case the world). In the BMS's view, mobilizing workers based on their class positions alone is reductive and even oppressive, tantamount to a form of wage slavery:

> "We try to inculcate among laborers the idea that you are working for your nation and not for your employer. [We tell them:] 'You are not working for those who are making a payment to you. That is a slave! You are not a slave. You are an independent citizen of India.'"[6]

In the eyes of BMS ideologues, Hindu national-citizen workers are thus not merely a class for themselves, but rather a class for something larger than themselves, a class for the integrity of the Hindu nation. This can be seen in many of BMS slogans, which are often communist slogans recast in the mold of Hindu nationalism. For instance, the Hindu nationalist rendition of the famous communist rallying cry "Workers of the world unite!" is "Workers, unite the world!" Similarly, the BMS takes the leftist refrain of "*kamane-wala khayega*!" (he who earns shall eat) and transforms it into "*kamane-wala khilayega*!" (he who earns shall feed others). In the BMS's view, the former is selfish, concerned only with the interest of the worker, while the latter is selfless: in feeding

[6] Interview, 9 August 2013, Vadodara, Gujarat.

others, the worker practices a form of *tapaysa* akin to that offered by Vishwakarma in producing the weapon to kill his son. As one senior BMS leader explained:

> We say, that the one who earns will see that everybody enjoys! This is the Hindu way of life. Not self-centered, [but] all-embracing. [The worker] takes everyone in his embrace, so that whatever he earns should not be for his own self or his own family, it should be for society, country, humanity.[7]

How do non-Hindus fit into this purportedly inclusive, "all-embracing" Hindu way of life? Put differently, who is excluded from the Hindu national corporate body and how is this exclusion administered? The BMS's position on the inclusion of workers from minority religious groups adheres closely to the official line of the rest of the Sangh Parivar. When I pushed BMS leaders to specify who was included (and excluded) in the collective entities of "the nation" or "humanity", they formulated vague answers that relied on a set of well-rehearsed rhetorical tricks that involved, for example, turning the term "Hindu" from a religious identity to an ethno-nationalist one that was based on common geographic and ethnic origins. "We include all workers" claimed one BMS leader:

> Even if he is following Islam or Christianity, as a nationality he is Hindu. 'You think you are a Muslim?' No, you are a Hindu! Hindu is the term used by the

[7] Interview, 14 August 2013, Vadodara, Gujarat.

> British to name the people who settled by the land of the Sindhu (Indus) River. Because they could not properly say Sindhu, they used the term Hindu.[8]

Such statements are commonly heard throughout the leadership ranks of the BMS, but also in other Sangh Parivar organizations. They are developed as part of the public relations arsenal of the Sangh as a defense against accusations of exclusion. In his musings on nationalism, the BMS's founder, Dattopant Thengadi (1992), elaborates that the criteria of inclusion within the Sangh Parivar is not based on religion, but rather on a commitment to "social and cultural integration" within the nation:

> It is quite untrue to say that other people are not allowed entry in the Sangh. […] We are asked whether a nationalist Muslim can enter the Sangh. We say if Muslims get themselves socially and culturally integrated with the nation, they are all our people. They can all come into the Sangh. It is not true that non-Hindus have no entry in the Sangh. […] Hindu Communists do not consider themselves Hindus. If they leave their negative attitude, they can follow Communism and still be Hindus.

Unfortunately, there is no data available on membership by religious identity from the BMS to assess the union's rhetorical commitment to inclusivity. One can quickly discern, however, that the majority of the BMS's membership and certainly its leadership, is Hindu. Yet, even in the absence of data that could further substantiate this qualitative impression of the union's Hindu majority, the BMS's claims of inclusivity, in all their

[8] Interview, 9 August 2013, Vadodara, Gujarat.

spuriousness, underscore an important dimension of the right-wing's hegemonic project. The Sangh Parivar's rhetoric on inclusion sheds light on how the Hindu right-wing, through the BMS, attempts to naturalize the specific identity of the Hindu worker so that it stands for the identity of all Indian workers. This amounts to a process of naturalization through hegemony, that is, it presents the identity of a specific subsection of the working class (Hindu workers) as the most essential, inherent identity of the entire working class.

Cozying up to competitors: the BMS's relationship to other labor unions

The BMS's ideological opposition to capitalism and communism notwithstanding, the union was often in close and cooperative quarters with leftist and centrist unions as it tried to expand its own membership. In 1963, the BMS worked with the socialist Hind Mazdoor Sabha (HMS) in Bombay to organize bank workers (Andersen and Damle 1987). In the late 1970s, BMS leaders met in Delhi with the leaders of two unions with socialist sympathies, the Hind Mazdoor Sangh and the Hind Mazdoor Panchayat to discuss a potential merger. The BMS put forth four conditions for the merger: (1) independence from political parties (2) rejection of class struggle (3) acceptance of Vishwakarma Jayanti as national worker's day and (4) rejection of the red flag of communists as the banner of the union. There was agreement on the first three conditions, but the two parties could not come to an agreement on the fourth (Anderson and Damle 1987). The merger was eventually abandoned by the BMS, but its attempt suggests that the BMS was making efforts to build and normalize its presence within the labor movement. Given the strength of the leftist presence in the Indian labor movement during the BMS's first decades of existence, it is understandable that the BMS would have tethered itself to more mainstream unions with leftist proclivities in its efforts to become

more of a household name among workers. Yet, these more established leftist unions also expressed a willingness to accept, albeit conditionally, the BMS despite its affiliation to the RSS and its ideological opposition to some of the central tenets of socialism and communism.

Collaborating with its opponents, even in defiance of the ideological tenets of Hindu nationalism, is one way the BMS tried to expand its base during the building phase of hegemony. The BMS also leveraged its relatively late start within the labor movement to its advantage. The BMS was established over a decade after INTUC and AITUC. Yet, as a late comer, the BMS was able to observe, dabble, and imbibe in successful organizing strategies and also identify failures or shortcomings faced by its competitors. Indeed, as much as the BMS forged alliances and learned from leftist traditions and practices of class politics, it also tried to grow in the spaces of neglect in the left-dominated terrain of the Indian labor movement. It was from this vantage point that the BMS leadership was able to identify an important gap in the dominant traditions of the Indian labor movement: the exclusion of informal workers.

Already in the 1970s, at least a decade before some of the major informal workers unions emerged in the Indian labor movement (Agarwala 2013), Thengadi, the BMS's chief ideologue expressed the need to organize informal workers who had historically been excluded from many of the major labor union federations. In a collection of essays penned by Thengadi, he ponders the puzzling situation in which the Indian labor movement has developed with the aim of protecting "the down-trodden, the poor, and the

exploited" in the country, but has neglected to include the very workers most in need of this protection:

> The attention of our trade unions has been mainly towards the plight of workers in organized industries. This is natural and justifiable on the grounds of necessity, practicality, and utility. These industries cause the concentration of the labor force which facilitates the growth of trade unionism. But in industries and occupations that are not so organized, the need for workers' organization is still greater. This is the paradoxical situation. Those who are in need of greater protection are least protected either by trade unionism or by legislation. (Thengadi 1972:80 emphasis in original)

In these writings, Thengadi goes on to reflect on the predicament of several groups of informal workers, including subcontracted construction workers, forest workers, artisans, social workers, domestic labor and even pensioners. There were scattered attempts to organize informal workers across the BMS's subnational units,[9] but as we shall see shortly, the BMS's plans to expand among informal workers was rerouted during the period of transition between building and maintaining right-wing hegemony.

[9] BMS leaders from Gujarat who were active in organizing workers in the state in the 1960s and 1970s told me about several struggles waged in the early 1970s on behalf of sub-contracted employees in large public-sector undertakings such as the Indian Petrochemicals Corporation Limited (IPCL) and the Oil and National Gas Corporation (ONGC). Interview 13 April 2016, Vadodara, Gujarat.

Though it was INTUC that was the largest labor union in the country, for the BMS, dislodging INTUC from its top position also required contending with the threat of communism. As we've seen above, however, the "red threat" was not just an obstacle to overcome, but also represented a creative force for Hindu nationalist labor leaders. This force propelled the BMS to oppose leftist influences symbolically, through the creation and propagation of a unique set of working-class divinities, narratives, and slogans. But the force of communism also pushed the BMS to attempt collaboration with its leftist and centrist competitors in an effort to become more of a household name within the Indian labor movement. These attempts were sometimes difficult to see to fruition, but they nevertheless reflected a desire for the BMS to expand and normalize its presence among workers. We also see that in this period of building hegemony, the BMS seems to have been able to exercise some agency in deciding how to navigate its respective arena of civil society without repercussions from the leading sections of the Hindu right-wing hegemonic bloc even when the union occasionally flouted the Hindu nationalist ideology enshrined by the central command of the movement, the RSS and the Jan Sangh.

The chaos of hegemonic transition (1978-1998)

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the BMS continued to grow in size within the Indian labor movement. In 1989, it had become the largest labor union in India. Despite – or perhaps because of – this expanding base of workers organized under its auspices, the BMS faded to the background within the Sangh Parivar. I argue that as Hindu nationalists inched closer to the capture of state power, as they began to in the immediate aftermath of India's National Emergency (1975-1977), tensions within the Sangh Parivar became

more fraught and revealed class-based fissures on the "universal plane" of Hindu nationalism. One tension emerged around the sharing of resources within the Sangh Parivar during the large-scale religious mobilization spearheaded by the Sangh's religious wing, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP). The VHP's campaigns became a top priority for the Sangh Parivar and commanded the resources of other Sangh members like the BMS. At another level, a tension emerged around the question of a unified Hindu nationalist position on the economy. Until the early 1990s, there was a semblance of coherence across the different members of the Sangh Parivar in their opposition to liberal economic reforms, but the BJP quickly abandoned this view to embrace economic liberalization. The result was a conflict between the pro-liberalization BJP on the one hand, and a growing chorus of anti-liberalization voices from other Sangh members like the BMS on the other hand.

There was no ideological conflict for the BMS in supporting the VHP's initiatives like the *Ram Janmabhoomi* campaign, but it did present a conflict of interests for the union. As we saw above, in the building phase of hegemony, in the 1970s, BMS leaders expressed an interest in expanding the union's presence among workers who had largely been excluded from labor unions. The priority given to the VHP and the religious initiatives it was leading meant that the BMS had to put its own plans for expansion as well as its more routine activities, like annual meetings, on hold. As Jaffrelot (2005) reports, the BMS voiced its desire to strengthen the union's network of labor organizers to support its plans for expansion but its request for more human resources to fuel this effort went unheeded by the RSS. The RSS made it clear that the BMS could not rely on

pracharaks being deputed to work for the union while the VHP rolled out its religious campaigns. Since all *pracharak* hands were needed on the VHP's deck, the BMS was informed that it would need to generate its own human resources for its expansionary pursuits among workers (Jaffrelot 2005:364).

Despite the constraints on resources, there was nevertheless a concerted effort from all members of the Sangh to support the campaigns for religious mobilization undertaken in the 1980s and 1990s. In preparation for the demolition of the *Babri Masjid* (Mosque) in Ayodhya, the BMS rescheduled its Ninth All-India Conference to ensure that workers would be free to volunteer their labor for the cause (Saxena 1993). BMS workers took part in the nationwide *rath yatra* (chariot procession) organized by Lal Krishna Advani in 1990 and in the *kar seva* (volunteer work) elicited for the mosque demolition (Saxena 1993). The BMS also defended the demolition of the *Babri Masjid* in the pages of its weekly journals and actively protested the arrest of members who had participated in the mosque destruction.

In the aftermath of the demolition of the *Babri Masjid* and the violent rioting against Muslims that ensued, the Indian government banned the RSS in 1992. Organizations like the BMS could continue their activities during the ban, but there was another difficulty simmering in the ranks of the Sangh due to divergent ideological positions on the important question of the economy. The BMS had always been closely aligned to the economic vision articulated in the philosophy of Integral Humanism, which drew inspiration from Gandhian ideals of decentralized, village-based economic production

and the promotion of indigenous industries to achieve economic self-sufficiency, known as *swadeshi*. To further strengthen the Sangh's anti-liberalization thrust, Thengadi, the BMS's founder, established a platform to "awaken" the national commitment to *swadeshi*, or the Swadeshi Jagran Manch (SJM) in 1994. Thengadi and the sections of the Sangh aligned to his *swadeshi* vision hoped that the BMS would be able to help "make a much bigger splash in the countryside than the RSS-sponsored programs related to Ayodhya" (Sonwalkar 1994). At the time, the BMS had become the largest labor union federation in India (GOI 2002). Though the BJP initially expressed some commitment to *swadeshi*, this was short-lived. Already by 1992, the party began to recast *swadeshi* as the economic platform of a "self-confident nation that can deal with the world", not the timorous economic program of an "inward looking nation, afraid to face an increasingly complex and aggressive world" (quoted in Thachil 1999:52).

By the end of the decade, when the BJP assumed power in 1999, it ardently furthered the market reforms that had been initiated by its competitor, the Congress. BJP Prime Minister Atul Bihari Vajpayee made disinvestment a top priority. Vajpayee established a separate Ministry of Disinvestment in 1999 and oversaw the sale of several large public sector undertakings in the telecommunications sector, in aluminum and zinc production, as well as in the petrochemicals industry. Privatization invoked resistance from organized labor all over the country. Interestingly, while the Congress's labor union, INTUC, shied away from protesting disinvestment when it was the Congress Party that administered India's market reforms, the BMS remained a consistent participant in anti-liberalization activities during both the Congress's rule as well as for most of the BJP's tenure (Uba

2005, 2008). The BJP's abandonment of, and the BMS's adherence to, *swadeshi* made class-based tensions beneath the surface of the Hindu nationalist universal plane apparent.

In this transition from building to maintaining right-wing hegemony, the BMS was no longer a vanguard in the ideological offensive launched in the building phase of hegemony. While the BMS did not oppose the religious mobilization that took off during the transition phase on ideological grounds, the attention and resources funneled towards the VHP did mean that the BMS was left with fewer resources for its own expansion. Thus, in this period, the BMS becomes a stagehand of sorts to the more sensational and spectacular religious violence orchestrated by the VHP.

The challenge of maintaining hegemony (1999 to the present)

Yet, even with the subordination of the BMS within the Sangh Parivar, the union continued to grow. As its membership grew, so did the force of its anti-liberalization thrust. After 1999, this force was directed towards its fellow Sangh member and India's ruling party, the BJP. With the BJP in control of state power, the party faced the challenge of reconciling the divergent aims and objectives of all the civil society groups that participated in building right-wing power with its own interests to remain in power. The conflicting class interests between the pro-liberalization BJP and the anti-liberalization BMS, which began to rear its head at the end of the transition phase, only develop further in this more advanced moment of hegemonic consolidation.

Indeed, the discord on the question of economic liberalization makes clear that the Sangh Parivar is riddled with competing objectives and even conflicting ideologies. While these have been a persistent feature of the Hindu right's history, earlier struggles were confined to a relatively small group, like the "traditionalists" versus "activists" within the RSS. In this period, the challenge mounted against liberalization from within the ranks of the Sangh had become weightier and riskier. The BMS, who by 2002, represented a base of over 6 million workers, also had the mass support of the Sangh's farmer's wing, the Bharatiya Kisan Sangh (BKS) and the SJM, in opposing liberalization. Thus, with the BJP in power at the national level, criticism from these groups revealed internal fissures within the Hindu nationalist movement that were amplified due to the mass base the movement had acquired while building its hegemony. Moreover, these fissures reflected economic grievances that had the potential to resonate with discontent of other groups outside of the Hindu nationalist movement who shared similar grievances.

The BMS's Thengadi emerged as a vocal critic of the Vajpayee-led BJP government, which was in power from 1999 to 2004:

> Vajpayee is capable enough to lead the developing world against dictates of developed nations, but he is surrounded by a coterie of unworthy advisors and is too busy in petty politics" (Anon 1999)

Accusing the Vajpayee government of subservience to the "economic imperialism of the United States", Thengadi proposed that India quit the World Trade Organization (WTO). In this protest against the WTO, the BMS once again worked in alliance with leftist unions as it had done in the past. Thengadi also elicited support from outside of the

Sangh from Communists like W.R. Varadarajan of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) labor affiliate Centre of Indian Trade Unions (CITU) and Manohar Deshkar of the CPI labor affiliate AITUC. Together they participated in rallies in New Delhi and Maharashtra in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Date 2001).

The BMS continued to pursue strategic alliances with the left as it had throughout the earlier phases of hegemonic consolidation. In the maintenance phase, however, the strategic alliances pursued with the left are riskier because they threaten the movement's capture of power and the internal cohesion on which this power is premised. The attempts to build alliances with leftist unions in opposition to the BJP's pursuit of economic liberalization made evident a potential basis for solidarity on an economic plane that could be even more "universal" than the "universal plane" of Hindu nationalism. Such displays of solidarity carried a different, more ponderous significance than the earlier partnerships of the 1960s and 1970s. Working in partnership with its competitors in these early decades raised some tension for the BMS as it often meant defying ideological tenets held within the Sangh, such as the rejection of class struggle and the disavowal of labor militancy. If the BMS strayed from these Hindu nationalist principles, it may have called into question the ideological coherence within the Sangh Parivar. I argue, however, that such displays of ideological promiscuity pose less of a concern in the building phase of hegemonic consolidation. In this period, Hindu nationalists had not yet captured state power through their parliamentary front. When the BMS participated in joint resistance with leftist groups against the Vajpayee government in the maintenance phase, however, these alliances became far riskier for the Hindu nationalist hegemonic bloc. Now, there

was more at stake. For one, the unity between the BMS and leftist unions in their opposition to the economic liberalization pursued by the BJP made evident that the "universal plane" of Hindu nationalism on which the BMS and the BJP were both positioned was perhaps not so "universal" after all. Rather, in their shared opposition to economic liberalization, the BMS and its leftist opponents revealed the contours of another basis of solidarity.

The BJP was voted out of power in 2004. For some scholars, this was a vote against the party's elite-oriented economic mandate, which did little to check the growing material deprivation and inequality that resulted from the unbridling of market forces, while for others it was an indication that the BJP and the rest of the Sangh had gone too far in offending the secular sensibilities of the Indian electorate (Shastri, Suri, and Yadav 2009; Yadav 2004). I argue that the BJP's ousting from power also underscores an important feature of hegemonic consolidation: even when state power lies in the hands of the party, hegemony is not guaranteed but must continually be maintained against a myriad of persistent threats and tensions related to both economic and cultural aspects of the BJP's rule. Indeed, the capture of state power does not imply that hegemonic actors have managed to cast a spell of consent over a restive population whom the party can dominate effortlessly. Rather, the work of maintaining power requires the "capacity to actively contain, educate and reshape oppositional forces, to maintain them in their subordinate places." In these early years of maintaining hegemony, there was evidently more learning to do on the part of the BJP and the Sangh Parivar in terms of containing, reshaping, and subordinating oppositional forces.

In 2014, the party won a landslide election under the leadership of Narendra Modi, who ran on a developmentalist and anti-corruption platform. Once again in 2019, the BJP was victorious, winning even more seats and a greater percentage of the vote. Even more impressive perhaps is the fact that the BJP's victory in 2019 came on the heels of widespread economic distress among the predominately poor Indian electorate and economic mismanagement under the first Modi government. In this more advanced moment of maintaining hegemony, the BMS's opposition has become more muted than it was in the earlier phases of hegemonic maintenance. While BMS union leaders occasionally release damning media bytes or organize demonstrations against some of the economic policies of the BJP-led government (Anon 2015, Anon 2020; Nanda 2017), the union often abstains from collective actions with other labor unions. Instead, it opts to voice criticism and organize protests independently of other unions.

In this period, the BJP has dug its heels further into state power. Yet, I argue, its power has also become more difficult to sustain. The BJP faces the challenge of ensuring that the allied groups with whom it worked to build hegemony continue to support the party in maintaining it, even if the aims of the different sections of the bloc are threatened by, or are in conflict with, the aims of the ruling party. The BMS poses a particularly acute challenge because it represents a force that has the power to disrupt economic production. This not only puts the governing competence of the BJP into question, but it also has the potential to delegitimize the ideological claim that Hindu nationalism is a universal plane for right-wing hegemony.

With the historical view of the BMS's earlier, sharper resistance against economic liberalization in mind, such responses from the union leadership certainly appear diluted. Yet, it would be incorrect to view the BMS as merely a puppet of the BJP. As we have seen above, the BMS has opposed the BJP government's espousal of economic liberalization under Vajpayee in the early years of the maintenance phase of right-wing hegemony. It was upon the BJP's return to power, after having fallen in 2004, that the BMS has become quieter in its opposition. In this sense, the BMS's silence may be reflective of a more concerted effort on the part of the BJP to contain and subordinate opposition after having seen that threats to its power could come from within its own family. In other words, the quieting of the BMS suggests that there may be growing insecurity on the part of the ruling sections of the Hindu nationalist hegemonic bloc around its ability to keep a lid on simmering class conflict, and a recognition that the BMS itself could become a vehicle for the further politicization of class inequality and heightened economic insecurity.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced a change over time in the BMS's role within the larger project of consolidating Hindu nationalist hegemony. The BMS's foundation gave the Hindu nationalist leaders more reach in Indian civil society and propelled the initial widening of Hindu nationalism as a cultural project of elite Hindus to a hegemonic project seeking more profound change in multiple spheres of social and political life in India. Within this process, the BMS has moved from having a front stage role in the building phase of

hegemony, which included defying ideological positions against class struggle and occasionally allying with the movement's sworn enemies on the left, to its more passive position as an understudy in the violent cultural turn taken by the movement in a chaotic period of transition, to a conflicted position where its criticism and contention has become quieter, but also perhaps more contained by Hindu nationalist leadership.

The national-level perspective taken in this chapter is helpful in illuminating the ideological commitments of the BMS and to trace the contours of the union's vision for organizing labor. It also points to, but does not sufficiently unearth, class tensions and a larger, related question of ensuring legitimacy in the eyes of workers as a potentially important dynamic in the process of hegemonic consolidation. In the building phase, the BMS emerges as a way for the right-wing to gain a foothold among workers and widen the reach of Hindu nationalism as a "universal plane." In this period, the threat of class-based resistance organized under the auspices of leftist political forces inspires the BMS to present a Hindu nationalist alternative to workers that tries to empower the citizen-worker as a unifying force and agent of progress for national development. In the transition to the maintenance phase, class tensions emerge when the leading sections of the Sangh Parivar first throw their support and attention behind cultural mobilization and then the BJP turns its back on the economic nationalism advocated by the BMS and instead pursues economic liberalization. These tensions are exacerbated in the maintenance phase. While the BMS attempts to continue its opposition against economic reforms, it has become markedly quieter in more recent years. I have suggested that this

is the result of a more active sidelining by the BJP who especially since 2014 has been seeking to maintain its hold on state power in a more centralizing, totalitarian way.

In the next chapter, we delve deeper into the relationship between the BMS and the rest of the Sangh Parivar and further investigate the role of competing political forces in shaping the right-wing's practice of class politics by focusing on the building phase of hegemony in two different subnational contexts: Kerala, where there is a strong Communist presence and history of militant labor movements and where the building phase of right-wing hegemony is ongoing, and Gujarat, where Communists have been markedly absent and where the labor movement's historical legacy is characterized by conciliatory traditions and where the building phase of hegemony has been completed.

Chapter 3: Building Hindu Nationalist Hegemony: The BMS in Gujarat (1960-1990) and Kerala (1960 to the present)

Overview of Chapter

This chapter explores the BMS's strategies in the building phase of hegemony in two different contexts. I compare the BMS's current strategies for building hegemony in Kerala with its past strategies for building hegemony in Gujarat. In both states, the BMS began organizing workers in the late 1960s. This was a time when other Sangh Parivar organizations were also gaining a foothold in civil and political society in both states. In Gujarat, the process of building hegemony ended in the 1990s, when the BJP took a hold of state power. In Kerala, where the BJP remains far from the seat of state power, the process of building hegemony is ongoing.

I demonstrate that there are two important similarities in the building phase of Hindu nationalist hegemony in both states. First, the BMS organizes strikes and even encourages militancy in defiance of Hindu nationalist ideological opposition to class conflict. The BMS's vigorous and militant style of organizing is a way for the union to make itself attractive to workers as it seeks to incorporate labor into Hindu nationalism as part of the building phase of hegemony. The BMS's militancy is also significant because it demonstrates that the right-wing union can exhibit ideological flexibility in its building phase strategies. Second, the BMS predominately mobilizes support from workers by emphasizing their class positions and material interests. The union does not explicitly organize workers by mobilizing Hindu nationalism's cultural dimension. That is, the union focuses on incorporating workers into the hegemonic project of Hindu nationalism in a way that emphasizes inter-class unity between different classes of Hindus rather than inter-ethnic disunity between workers of different religious groups. I argue that the BMS doesn't actively foment inter-ethnic disunity in either context of building hegemony because divisions between Hindus and religious minority groups have already been established and reinforced outside of the BMS, by other Sangh groups (in the case of Gujarat), by the Sangh's competitors (in the case of Kerala), or processes that have fragmented labor markets prior to the BMS's establishment.

The chapter also highlights a key difference between the building phase of hegemony in Kerala and Gujarat. In Kerala the union is more at the vanguard of the Sangh Parivar in the ongoing process of building hegemony than it was in the past period of building hegemony in Gujarat. In this leading position, the BMS is better supported by the rest of

the Sangh Parivar in Kerala than it was in Gujarat in the past. I argue that more institutional support from the Sangh Parivar for the BMS's efforts in the building phase helps the union produce a more stable articulation of the Hindu nationalist citizen-worker. As we shall see in the following chapter, this proves to be important for the maintenance of hegemony.

This chapter is organized into the following sections. First, I discuss the salient attributes of the building phase of Hindu nationalist hegemony that are similar to both Kerala today and Gujarat in the past. The second section analyzes the differences in the two cases of building hegemony. It considers how the different intersections of class and religious social structures in Gujarat and Kerala shape the BMS's differential position within the hegemony building efforts in each context. By way of concluding this chapter, I consider the implications of these differences for the process of consolidating right-wing hegemony.

Similarities across two state contexts

The BMS organizes workers vigorously and militantly

"If you really want to understand how the BMS is supposed to work, then you should go to Kerala" advised Hussainbhai[10], a veteran BMS labor organizer and leader from

[10] When I first met Hussainbhai in 2013, he was introduced to me by the senior-most BMS leader in Gujarat, Keshavlal Thakkar. Thakkar brought Hussainbhai up in conversation when we were discussing the "Hindu" character of the BMS. In line with the official rhetoric of the union and the Sangh, Thakkar

Vadodara, Gujarat. Why was this senior BMS leader from a district with the largest membership in Gujarat, a state that is considered to be India's laboratory for Hindu nationalism, telling me to go to Kerala? In Kerala, the BMS is dwarfed by the presence of leftist labor unions (see Figure 3). The Left's legacy of working-class political mobilization is considered to be a bulwark against the encroachments of the Hindu right. Yet, in the eyes of experienced right-wing labor leaders, Kerala is a paradigmatic case of Hindu nationalist labor organizing, not Gujarat. Hussainbhai was not the only BMS leader with this opinion. The BMS's national General Secretary, Vrijesh Upadhyay, dubbed Kerala a "model" for the BMS in other parts of India.[11] What explains this puzzling assessment of the BMS's success in Kerala?

Kerala: Right-wing labor militancy propelled by the Left?

Despite the Hindu nationalist critique of class conflict as being divisive to the unity of the Hindu nation, the BMS routinely participates in strikes in Kerala. In September 2016, tens of millions of workers were in the streets protesting the economic policies of the BJP government all over India. Many news outlets reported that this historic event was likely the largest general strike in world history. The BMS was conspicuously absent from the

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claimed that the BMS does not discriminate on the basis of religion and that in fact, there are several Muslim office bearers in the BMS throughout the country. He mentioned Hussainbhai as one example. Hussainbhai was also a member of the RSS in his youth. The BMS rank-and-file workers I met during the course of my ethnography in 2016 and 2017 insisted that Hussainbhai was in fact Hindu. They said that in the first year that they joined the BMS, they called Hussainbhai to wish him "Eid Mubarak" only to hear from Hussainbhai that he accepted their wishes but in fact celebrates Diwali just like the workers. The workers told me that Hussainbhai's house also contained a Hindu personal shrine (*puja kotha*).

[11] Interview, 22 March 2016, New Delhi, India.

strike. Its national-level executive decided to back out at the last minute. In Kerala, however, several BMS units participated in the general strike despite the federation's official decision to abstain from it.[12]

When union leaders in Kerala justify their defiance of Hindu nationalist ideological tenets and practices followed by the national-level BMS, they point to the strong influence of the Communist party in conditioning the pro-militancy proclivities of the labor movement in that state. "Even if we are reluctant to call for a *hartal* [strike] or a *bandh* [blockade], because that's exactly the practice the Communist union's follow, we cannot say otherwise" explained Gopikrishna, a BMS worker-leader in the medical supply industry in Calicut.

Throughout much of the 20th century, Kerala was the site of some of the most insurrectionary class politics in India (Heller 1995; Nossiter 1982; Oommen 1985). Beginning in the 1940s, Communists in Kerala organized a labor movement that represented a wide swathe of workers, including agricultural wage laborers, plantation workers, industrial labor, and public service workers, as part of their leftist hegemony building efforts (Desai 2002; Heller 1999)

[12] Interview, 19 October 2016, Ernakulam Kerala.

Given how pivotal organized labor was in the building of Left-wing hegemony in Kerala, it is perhaps of little surprise that Hindu nationalists would also prioritize winning the support of workers in the state by organizing them through the BMS. One RSS leader from Alappuzha, a region of the state that was historically fertile grounds for communist mobilizing, made the point clear: "because this is a place of trade unions, it is important for us to have a union organization in place so we can reach working class communities."[13]

Gujarat: Right-wing labor militancy in the absence of the Left

Surprisingly, in Gujarat too BMS leaders took part in strikes in the prime of building hegemony despite the absence of a widely sown "Communist seed" in that state. In sharp contrast to Kerala, Indian communists and other leftist parties have historically been a marginal presence in state politics in Gujarat. The centrist Congress Party, which dominated state politics for much of the 20th century, has long exhibited conservative tendencies and been in close alignment with religious and economic elites in the state (Shah 1994). The conservativism and elite presence of the Congress Party persisted even in periods when the Congress was able to acquire popular support from lower classes. The conservative mass character of the Congress was cultivated by perhaps the most famous Gujarati of the 20th century, Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi. Although he became a well-known figure for Hindu-Muslim unity in India in the late colonial period, much of

[13] Interview, 15 May 2017, Alappuzha, Kerala.

Gandhi's mass organizing during the independence struggle was forged in Hindu religious idioms and cultural norms and sought to reform, rather than dismantle caste hierarchies.

To build support among workers during the anti-colonial movement, Gandhi pioneered the "Ahmedabad experiment" of industrial relations in the first part of the 20th century. Ahmedabad was Gujarat's biggest city and the largest center of textile production in the state until the 1960s. When the Congress Party was consolidating its own hegemony after Indian independence in 1947, Gandhi's "Ahmedabad experiment" became the protype for the post-independence industrial relations regime. While the Congress professed a commitment to a secular version of Indian nationalism, Hindu moral tones infused Gandhi's nationalist formulation of industrial relations. He developed a framework for class compromise that he claimed was uniquely Indian, one that would be well suited to its "spiritual and inward-looking nature as opposed to the "materialistic and outward-looking" orientation of class relations in the West (Patel 1987). Gandhi offered a framework for industrial dispute resolution cast in the mold of Indian nationalism, which opposed strikes as detrimental to the national interest, and instead advocated for arbitration and other modes of conciliatory resolution to industrial disputes.

The Textile Labor Association (TLA), the largest labor union in the textile industry of Gujarat, carried out Gandhi's ideological vision for class compromise. It also reinforced religious and caste distinctions by mirroring the religious and caste divisions in the organization of production (Breman 2004). This did not go unchallenged by workers. In

the early 1930s, Muslim weavers sought support from Communists and a radical left-wing faction within the Congress Party because they felt politically alienated by the Hindu morality of the TLA and underrepresented in comparison to Hindu workers in the union (Breman 2004). With the backing of the Congress Party, the TLA quickly wiped out this resistance and leftist unions were never able to establish a strong counter-presence in the textile industry.

The historical legacy of Gandhi's experiment shaped much of the Congress's rule in Gujarat. The early reputation of Ahmedabad as a "conspicuous model of peace…distinguished by the rarity of strikes and lockouts" (Patel 1987:1) persisted well into the mid-20th century. In the heyday of militant labor struggles in states like Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu, which like Gujarat were important centers of industrial production, labor unrest in Gujarat remained comparatively low (Upadhyay 2014). In fact, low labor militancy has been such a consistent feature of industrial relations in Gujarat, that it is common for state officials to attribute it to an inherently peaceful, genetic feature of the working class. "By genesis [the working class of Gujarat] has a non-militant mindset. They behave in the limits of this inherent legacy" said the Deputy Commissioner of Labor in Gujarat.[14] It also diverges starkly from the levels of militancy seen in Kerala (see Figure 4).

[14] Interview, 26 June 2013, Ahmedabad, Gujarat.

Yet, labor leaders who were active in the building phase of Hindu nationalist hegemony revealed that even in the militancy-averse political culture of Gujarat, the BMS had a militant past. "We waited for the boss's car to pull up, and then we slashed his tires!" boasted BMS leader, Hussainbhai Solanki. Solanki, a man in his late 60s, joined the BMS as a full-time labor organizer in 1984 after he was suspended from his factory job at the Satyadev Chemicals Factory in Vadodara, Gujarat. Hussainbhai worked as a machine operator at Satyadev during the 1970s and 1980s. He led several labor struggles at the factory, the most remarkable of which lasted for nine months and ended with his termination.

Other senior BMS leaders revealed similar past experiences with labor militancy. Baskarbhai Thakore, a 75-year-old man who was one of the BMS's founding members proudly described his own militant past, which included a strike at the Jyoti Chemicals factory in Vadodara in 1970 around wage increases and the unfair suspension of workers.[15] "I have led many strikes in my day!" chirped one of the BMS's founding members, Keshavlal (Keshukaka) Thakkar, who was in his late 90s and had joined the BMS as a full-time organizer in 1967. Baskarbhai and Keshukaka jointly supported contract employees in their fight to become permanent workers at the state-owned Indian

[15] Interview, 13 April 2016, Vadodara, Gujarat.

Petrochemical Corporation Limited (IPCL) and the Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC) factories in Vadodara.[16]

Labor militancy as a way to harness the power of workers in building right-wing hegemony

Historically in Gujarat and currently in Kerala, Hindu right-wing hegemony building is characterized by the BMS's practice of labor militancy in defiance of Hindu nationalist ideological tenets. Why do BMS leaders compromise their ideological integrity and go on strike? How do BMS leaders justify this ideological promiscuity? In Kerala, BMS leaders point to the hegemonic presence of the Communists, which propels them to go on strike even if they are reluctant to do so. In fact, BMS leaders see this as a matter of necessity:

> …We cannot survive in any other way. The Communist seed in this land was cultivated in such a huge way that it has [spread] to every "hook and crook" of the state. The BMS's ideology is similar to the early Communist movement in Kerala, because as we say in our songs and in our work, we are also working for the poorest of the poor. That is what we have in common…[17]

This reasoning is in line with social movement theorists who argue that the effectiveness of social movements is often determined by the way it frames issues, interests, and how it defines its political subjects (Ray 1999). Ray (1999:9) further argues "a social movement

[16] Interview, 13 April 2016, Vadodara, Gujarat
[17] Interview, 26 June 2017, Kozhikode, Kerala, emphasis added.

organization confronting a hegemonic political culture has less freedom and must find some way of working within the dominant discourse." Thus, in this view, as the Hindu right tries to dismantle the existing hegemony of the Left in Kerala, they also surrender to the existing political culture in order to implant the BMS among the subaltern groups.

Yet, if it is the existing political culture of labor militancy that pulls the BMS towards strikes in Kerala, then why do we also see BMS leaders in Gujarat boastful and nostalgic of their militant pasts? In Gujarat, the BMS entered into a dominant political culture where labor militancy and disruptions to production were avoided and legitimized on the basis of nationalism inflected with Gandhi's Hindu moral tones. These features of the labor movement established by the Congress and its labor union federation, INTUC, overlapped significantly with the BMS's own ideologies. Even without the pull of Communism, BMS leaders still went against the official Hindu nationalist ideological position and organized strikes.

The BMS's Keshukaka Thakkar, 93, one of the pioneering right-wing labor organizers during the BMS's building phase in Gujarat, laid bare his view of the merit of militancy:

> No one in the BMS will tell you this, but a strike in an industry, is it a spoke in the wheel of development in this industry? No! […] A strike enriches the management as well as the labor. […] It is a boon for development. When there is no strike, there is no development. The strike actually forces the management to see the truth. […] In the textile industry, there was no strike and the management

never looked into the problems. If there had been a strike, they would have been forced to look into the problems of efficiency, productivity, profits…[18]

Keshukaka's response suggests that the dominant political culture shapes the BMS's strategies with respect to labor militancy in terms of how leaders justify straying from Hindu nationalist ideology. At this level, we see the dominant political culture acting upon the BMS in both contexts of building hegemony. In both places, the BMS enshrines the role of the labor union as it is ensconced within the prevailing political culture, that is, as a broker of development. In Gujarat, where Gandhi's Ahmedabad experiment envisioned a role for the labor union as a broker of industrial peace and a conduit for instilling in workers' a commitment to participating in economic production, BMS leaders preserve the same end goal as the Gandhian industrial relations framework: strikes are useful as a way of *stabilizing labor-capital relations* because it forces capitalists to deal with the problems that are compelling workers to disrupt production and profit-making. Keshukaka also levies an implicit critique of the dominant labor union of the Congress-era, the INTUC, which refrained from strikes as per its nationalist ideology, but to the detriment of the textile industry's sustainability. Accordingly, in Keshukaka's view, the BMS offers an improvement on INTUC, because the former goes on strike in the event that workers need to communicate "problems of efficiency, productivity, profit", but it also does this with the development of industries in mind.

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[18] Interview, 12 April 2016, Vadodara, Gujarat

In Kerala, BMS leaders also affirm the role of labor unions in the state's prevailing political culture while providing an immanent critique of the unions that are dominant in the right-wing's building phase of hegemony. BMS leaders in Kerala readily affirm the past legacy of communism in ushering in large gains for workers in terms of their human and economic development. The assessment of the contemporary ruling Left is not without critical assessment, however. Many BMS leaders described the high literacy rates and high levels of political awareness among the working class in Kerala as the work of the early Communist movement, singling out institutions like local reading rooms or village libraries which were a key institution in the leftist hegemony building efforts in the state. While the BMS upheld the Left's historical role in organizing workers and institutionalizing their class and political power, their assessment of the current practices of the Communist Party were more critical.

"The problem with the Communist Party," declared Ashamol, a BMS leader from Alappuzha, a district in the southern part of Kerala, "is that they no longer practice communism!" As we rode past the palatial CPM office in the Kuttanad region of Alappuzha district, a stronghold for communist organizing among agrarian workers, Ashamol pointed to the building and scoffed, "that is the party of the common people!"[19]

[19] Interview, 15 May 2017, Alappuzha, Kerala

BMS leaders chided the CPM for instrumentalizing its labor affiliate, CITU, as a "feeding organization" for the CPM, merely a way for the party to fill its coffers with workers' dues.[20] Others criticized the CPM for reducing workers to a vote bank:

> CITU leaders were principled in their commitments to workers, but slowly it has become clear that the trade union is just a steppingstone to politics. Once they are in power, they find that they cannot satisfy workers' demands because they are part of the government machinery.[21]

Others, like Manikantan, a BMS leader from Palakkad levied accusations that Communists were repressive and anti-democratic:

> Communists don't listen to the people; they don't take the problem of the people seriously. Instead, they tell the people what their main problem is. People might be ready to [protest] in a CPM stronghold, but the party will tell them they cannot go to that protest and instead should come to another one. The actual problem will not be attended to, the party will decide what the problem is and place this in front of the people. They don't care about public opinion.[22]

BMS workers also echoed similar sentiments about CITU. One BMS member who was previously unionized with CITU in Palakkad district contrasted the approachability and receptiveness of BMS leaders compared to CITU leaders. "We can simply talk to our

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[20] Interview, 26 June 2017, Kozhikode, Kerala
[21] Interview, 9 May 2017, Kannur, Kerala
[22] Interview, 7 May 2017, Palakkad, Kerala

[BMS] leaders, but this is not the case with CITU. They would act as if we were their servants."[23] Another BMS member from the same local unit at the Fluid Control Research Institute (FCRI) described how their struggles to improve their wages and secure more vacation days were unsuccessful while CITU dominated the workplace. CITU had a twenty-five-year-reign at FCRI until 2014. Since then, the BMS has a dominant position at FCRI and workers reported that they have been able to secure their contracts, have received wage increases, and more vacation days. With CITU leaders, workers reported that to get anything done, they had to "hold their feet and beg."[24]

Gopikrishna and Mani, two BMS leaders from the northern city of Kozhikode, accused CITU of focusing on sections of workers who were already captive bases for CPM, such as public servants who pegged their employment security to keeping the party in power, while they neglected sections of the workforce whose political allegiances were more mercurial. The BMS targeted these workers and claimed that their members had defected from CITU because their grievances had gone unaddressed by the union. "They tell us that there's a huge stack of unattended welfare claims sitting in the CITU office" Gopikrishna declared.[25]

[23] Interview, 8 May 2017, Palakkad, Kerala
[24] Interview, 8 May 2017, Palakkad, Kerala
[25] Interview, 26 June 2017, Kozhikode, Kerala

In the building phase of right-wing hegemony in Kerala, BMS leaders uphold the role of the labor union as it was established by earlier hegemons and accepted as part of the labor movement's political culture. They enshrine the role of the labor union as the primary vehicle for the political organization of labor and as a broker of welfare entitlements to workers, which was established as part of the Communist-led efforts to consolidate left-wing hegemony. This is similar to the type of critique made by BMS leaders who were active in the building phase of hegemony in Gujarat. Thus, at a discursive level, political culture shapes how the BMS legitimizes the ideological flexibility that it exercises in the building phase. Rather than change the political culture or normative topology of the labor movement, in both Gujarat's past phase of building right-wing hegemony and Kerala's ongoing phase, the BMS instead attempts to take over the trenches of civil society as they have been dug by the dominant actors in the existing or previous hegemonic project.

The question remains, however, of why the BMS goes on strike and why this deviant organizational behavior is tolerated by the leaders of the Sangh Parivar (namely the RSS). I argue that the BMS's engagement with labor militancy is a way of acknowledging labor's class power and signaling to workers that the Hindu right-wing is committed to representing their interests. This is useful for building hegemony because the right-wing wants to harness the power of workers as its political supporters and as key inputs in capitalist accumulation. We can see the BMS's recognition of the different sources of workers' class power in the building phases of right-wing hegemony in Gujarat and Kerala.

In Kerala, labor's class power is primarily associational (Silver 2003; Wright 2000). Workers' power is derived from the highly disciplined, cadre-based organization at the grassroots, which has historically been organized under the auspices of Indian Communist parties. This power has structured a political consensus in Kerala such that redistribution to lower classes remains a constant feature of state politics even when Communists are not in power (Kannan 2002). The Hindu right recognizes that in building its own power, it too must yoke itself to the associational class power of workers just as the earlier hegemonic actors did in Kerala during the Left's phase of building hegemony in the early 20th century.

In Gujarat, labor's class power is primarily structural. That is, workers' power is derived from their positions as inputs in economic production, especially in sectors that are deemed strategic for economic growth (Silver 2003; Wright 2000). The older generation of BMS leaders who organized workers during the building phase of hegemony in Gujarat were focused on high-growth sectors that the state government earmarked as engines of industrial development in the late 1960s (Government of Gujarat 1964). This was a period of industrial restructuring in Gujarat. The initial decline of the textile industry coupled with the discovery of oil in southern and northeastern Gujarat propelled investments into the petrochemical industry, as well as in mining and engineering. The Government of Gujarat, also encouraged diversification of the state's manufacturing activities in chemical, cement and electrical industries. Vadodara was rapidly growing (Government of India 1969). It was also one of the first hubs of BMS organizing. The

first generation of labor organizers in the BMS, Keshukaka, Bhaskarbhai and Hussainbhai, started off as workers in the chemical industry before they committed themselves to the BMS. The union was thus well-positioned in its endeavor of harnessing the power of some of the most structurally powerful workers in Gujarat to the Hindu nationalist hegemonic project.

Thus, in its strategies to build hegemony over workers, the BMS in both Gujarat and Kerala combine an understanding of the established "common sense" understandings of class politics in each state context with a structural assessment of the different ways class power is constituted in both states. Recognizing the "common sense" established by the existing hegemons is useful for the BMS as a guide for the acceptable modes of navigating the space of the labor movement. In this way, the BMS can gain legitimacy within the labor movement in comparison to other unions. The BMS also seeks legitimacy in the eyes of workers, and thus affirms the class power of workers. In Gujarat, where workers' class power is primarily structural, this is seen in the BMS's justification of strikes as a way of exposing to capitalists what the grievances of workers are in order to alleviate tensions between labor and capital. In Kerala, this is seen in the BMS's justification of strikes as being the established practice of the Communists who were once a vibrant force for democratization and building grassroots connections with workers but have since neglected workers' political power and limited their political agency.

The BMS emphasizes class positions and material interests of workers, not their ethno-religious identities

In both Gujarat's historical phase and Kerala's ongoing phase of building hegemony, the BMS is explicit in affirming workers' class power and material interests without explicitly antagonizing workers from minority religious groups. In Kerala, religious conflicts have been rare throughout the state's history. In Gujarat, this strategy stands out against the state's long history of Hindu-Muslim violence, in which workers and Sangh Parivar organizations have played a salient role (Breman 2004; Shah 1970b; Valiani 2011). In this section I explore the political idioms and strategies the BMS uses instead of the more familiar cultural mode of violent boundary-drawing as a way of building working-class support for Hindu nationalist hegemony. I also argue that the BMS is able to refrain from actively sowing divisions between Hindu workers and workers from religious minority groups because other organizations, either in the Sangh Parivar or external to it, have taken care of this task.

Kerala: Right-wing affirmation of workers' associational power

The very act of unionizing workers is an important way the BMS affirms the class power of workers during the building phase of right-wing hegemony. The BMS forms local units in Kerala at the behest of workers who are excluded from Communist unions on account of their Hindu nationalist allegiances. This was the case for a group of toddy tappers (agricultural workers engaged in gathering and processing the liquor from coconut palms) in Alappuzha district. The workers were refused membership from the

toddy cooperatives set up by communists because they were also RSS *swayamsevaks*.[26] In creating a BMS workers' cooperative for those excluded by the left, the Hindu right not only affirms the importance of workers' economic interests, but it does so in a way that affirms the class power of workers. Workers excluded by the Communists are empowered by the representation the BMS offers them. The material grievances of toddy workers are addressed by forming a workers' cooperative, or union, which offers state-backed protections and benefits on the basis of their members contributions to production.

The BMS also affirms the class power of workers in Kerala by tapping into the state's labor welfare boards. This was on full display during an impressive membership drive held in the state in June 2017. BMS organizers from all over the state worked tirelessly to grow the union's base by 100,000 new members, a nearly 20% increase from the approximately 518,000 members the BMS claims state-wide in Kerala. Through this campaign, known as the *sampark yajnam* (lit. "plan for connection"), the BMS pursued a strategy to attract new members by emphasizing the union as a vehicle for accessing the Kerala state's labor welfare boards. The first labor welfare boards were instituted under a Communist government in 1969. They have since been maintained by subsequent governments on account of the political sway of organized labor in reproducing the pro-worker consensus in the state (Kannan 2002). The boards are financed by contributions

[26] Interview, 6 June 2017, Alappuzha, Kerala

from workers, employers and the state. They require that workers be unionized in order to avail of benefits, which include pensions, health, accident, and death insurance schemes, as well as financial assistance for housing, education, and marriage. Kerala's labor welfare boards are remarkable for their early inclusion of informal workers (Agarwala 2013; Heller 1999). In place of the usual requirement of formal employment in other Indian states, workers, whether they are formally employed or not, are required to be unionized in order to be eligible for benefits (Kannan 2002).

For the BMS, this requirement is crucial to much of its work in expanding membership. Even outside of the *sampark yajnam*, labor welfare boards are an important way for the BMS to grow its membership. "Since workers have to be unionized in order to receive benefits, they are happy to join the BMS" explained Suresh Kumar, a BMS leader from Kerala's northern Kannur district.[27] BMS organizers would entice new members who were not union members by promising them access to welfare benefits. In Palakkad district, BMS leaders set up a table at a local public health event organized by the BJP. Those who had come for the free medicine distributed at the event had their interest piqued when BMS organizers called out the Malayalam word for welfare, *kshema*, from their station. Similarly, in Alappuzha district, in a neighborhood meeting held as part of the *sampark yajnam*, workers came with an interest in learning how to sign up for the welfare boards and how to ensure that they receive benefits. The conversations between

[27] Interview, 9 May 2017, Kannur, Kerala

the BMS leaders and potential rank-and-file recruits tended to revolve around navigating the bureaucracy of the welfare boards. The Hindu nationalist identity of the BMS or of the new recruits was not a topic of conversation. Instead, the BMS engages in the ideological empowerment of workers by participating in the labor welfare boards, which were the successful outcome of past grassroots struggles by workers. In doing so, the BMS affirms the exercise of workers' political power and implicitly expresses a commitment to maintaining the fruits of this struggle in addition to affirming the class power of workers to affect social change.

Gujarat: Right-wing affirmations of workers' labor power

During the past building phase of Hindu nationalist hegemony in Gujarat, much like today in Kerala, BMS leaders' strategy for mobilizing the support of workers involved emphasizing their economic interests and empowering them ideologically on the basis of their class positions. In the late 1960s and early 1970s in the nascent years of the BMS's expansion in Gujarat, with few resources at their disposal, Baskarbhai and Keshukaka would often hop on their bicycles and ride to factories to meet workers:

> We would go to the tea stalls outside the factory gates at the time workers would change shifts. We would sit, drink tea together, and ask them: 'Brother, where do you work? What salary are they paying you? Do you get holidays? If you get injured, do you get compensated?' We would ask them these questions and tell

them what they deserve to get according to the law and so on. Then we would tell them about the BMS, our aims, and where we had a presence.[28]

The recruitment conversations BMS leaders had with workers occurs through an idiom of class politics, where workers are informed about what they deserve to get based on their positions as inputs in economic production, which is an entitlement that is backed by the law and enforced by the state. Even when describing the BMS's aims to workers at the gate meetings, leaders emphasized the benefits the BMS had been able to extend to workers in comparison to the material gains that were offered by other unions. BMS leaders recognized that workers had agency in choosing between different unions. "Workers appreciated this information because they are always weighing different options." At one level, this reflects a practical assessment on the part of BMS leaders that workers are first and foremost enticed by securing their "*rozi roti*" (lit. daily bread) and not the ideological character of the union.[29]

At another level, however, there is also an ideological commitment to affirming the importance of workers' material conditions in a way that enshrines their class power. Senior BMS leaders spoke about their past lives as workers with a great sense of pride. One evening at the BMS office, Keshukaka and Bhaskarbhai, recounted their experiences as workers. With great exuberance, Keshukaka pointed to his close friend and informed

[28] Interview, 8 November 2016, Vadodara, Gujarat
[29] Interview, 13 April 2016, Vadodara, Gujarat

me, "He has the identity of a mazdoor [worker], and I also have it!"[30] Bhaskarbhai smiled as he described the lathe he operated when he worked in the chemical industry. "It was huge! It came all the way from Hungary!" he said as his nostalgia for foreign capital momentarily compromised his economically nationalist (*swadeshi*) commitments. For Baskarbhai, working on the lathe gave him "*kala haath*" (black hands). "Having *kala haath* shapes one's thinking" he explained. "Once you've struggled at work, there is a type of understanding that you gain, which those white-collar people don't know" he said. Keshukaka too was proud to be a "worker among workers." He eagerly rattled off all the jobs he had held before committing to full-time labor organizing with the BMS in 1967. He recalled his experiences as a headload carrier in the railways, as an assistant to mechanics on the shopfloor, a loom operator in the textile industry, and a factory worker in the chemical industry. It was this lengthy work history that allowed him to acquire his own *kala haath* understanding of workers' issues and motivated him to take part in organizing labor with the BMS in the 1960s.

Exogenous estrangement of Muslims allows the BMS to focus on explicitly mobilizing workers' material interests

Why did the BMS abstain from violent boundary-drawing in both states, during their respective phases of building hegemony? I argue that the BMS did not explicitly draw on Hindu-Muslim divisions in order to instill the support of workers because these

[30] Interview, 6 April 2016, Vadodara, Gujarat

boundaries were already drawn by other actors. In the case of Kerala, Muslims were already marginalized during the building of Leftist hegemony in the first part of the 20th century. Communists built their power by implanting themselves primarily among the Ezhava Hindu caste, the largest caste group in the state. Communists spent several decades intensely mobilizing of Ezhava support at the grassroots, taking over existing civil society institutions and building new ones as part of their own work of building hegemony (Desai 2002; Heller 1995). The political bonds between Communists and the Muslim community, by contrast, have largely been limited to Communist coalitions with the Indian Muslim League political party. In the case of Gujarat, Muslims were historically one of the constituents of the dominant Congress Party. It became clear, however, that the Congress's efforts to represent Muslims were not robust to the violent antagonisms and attempts at marginalizing Muslims made by the Sangh Parivar, especially towards the last decades of the 20th century. Thus, in Gujarat, it was other Sangh Parivar members who took care of the violent boundary-drawing that helped carve out Hindu support along religious lines. The following section further elaborates this point by situating the BMS within the wider Hindu-right hegemony building efforts in both state contexts.

The Sangh Parivar's early hegemony building efforts began in a similar way in both Kerala and Gujarat. In Kerala, it was the BMS's founder, Dattopant Thengadi who established the first RSS branch in the northern city of Calicut in 1942. Another RSS *pracharak*, Madhukar Oak, was tasked with building the RSS's presence in the southern region of Travancore-Cochin. Thengadi and Oak were sent to Kerala by the second chief

of the RSS, M.S. Golwalkar. Golwalkar was eager to establish a strong presence in Kerala because he considered it to be the home of Hindu nationalism's biggest enemies: Communists, Muslims and Christians (Golwalkar 1966).

Though its aims were to establish a popular grassroots presence, the initial support of the RSS in Kerala came from the more elite sections of Hindu society. In most of Kerala's districts, the RSS first took root among elite caste and class communities and attracted mostly members of professional families (such as doctors and lawyers), industrialists, and Hindu religious elites. As was the case in other parts of India, in Kerala too, throughout the 1940s, the RSS worked closely with royal families such as the Zamorins and Nilamburs (Villat 2019). They also drew support from dominant caste Hindus who once supported the Congress Party but had grown disillusioned because of the ties Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi attempted to forge with Indian Muslims (Villat 2019).

Once it was firmly planted in these elite circles, RSS activists branched out into lower caste and working-class communities by forging ties with existing caste organizations. In the south, the RSS worked with one of the most powerful caste organizations in Kerala: the Shree Narayan Dharma Paripalan (SNDP). The SNDP, established in 1903, was focused on reforming education and religious institutions as a way of offering upward social mobility of the Ezhava caste. Ezhavas were formerly considered to be an "untouchable" caste (*avarna*, or outside of the caste system). In the SNDP (and Communist) stronghold of Alappuzha, one of its leaders was instrumental in helping the RSS begin *shakha* activities in the district (Jayaprasad 1991). Indeed, many of Kerala's

early Communists leaders first got their feet wet in activism through the caste reform movements in Kerala (Desai 2002; Nossiter 1982). The Communists were able to reconfigure caste politics to mobilize Ezhava support along class lines during their own efforts to build hegemony. I argue that this may unintentionally provide a political windfall for the Hindu right in its hegemony building phase in Kerala because it offers them the undivided (by caste) bloc of Hindu nationalist support that they have long desired.

In northern Malabar, the RSS forged fewer official ties with caste associations and focused on building an independent presence in civil society. Malabar had already become fertile grounds for left-wing organizing in the 1930s. Like the South, Communists had incorporated the social struggles of marginalized Hindu caste communities in their larger hegemonic project of democratization (Desai 2002; Heller 1999). Muslims in northern Kerala, whose population was larger than in the South, had historical roots in radical struggles against feudal landlords from the late 19th century and well into the first decades of the 20th century. In the aftermath of a failed rebellion in 1921 of Muslim peasants (known as Moplahs or Mapillas) against their Hindu landlords, Muslims were politically alienated from both leftist and centrist political forces that were active in Malabar (Desai 2002; Menon 2002; Punathil 2010). Thus, when the Hindu right entered Kerala in the 1940s, they were foraying onto a political terrain where they faced the behemoth presence of Communists who had the popular backing of mostly Hindus. Muslims, on the other hand, instead organized into alternative political formations like the Indian Muslim League political party.

A predominately Ezhava Hindu-backed Communist party was the primary force to reckon with for the Sangh Parivar organizations during the initial decades of building hegemony in Kerala. When the BMS began its organizing efforts in 1967, Kerala's labor movement was in a state of tumult. The Communist Party of India (CPI) had recently undergone a bitter split and the CPI's labor affiliate, AITUC, became a target for the newly formed CPM's (Communist Party of India- Marxist) membership raids (Heller 1999). In 1968, the Mangalore Ganesh Bidi factory, the largest bidi (hand rolled cigarette) company in Kerala, closed its doors in response to protective welfare legislation for workers implemented by the Communist government in 1967. Over 12,000 workers lost their jobs.

The RSS tried to take advantage of the closure of the Ganesh Bidi factory to build a presence among workers. The RSS's chief at the time, Golwalkar, had developed a close friendship with the bidi barons, who were men of the upper-caste Gaud Saraswati Brahmin community.[31] The RSS offered to provide contract labor to fuel the home-based production of bidis. "The RSS understood that if these laid-off workers were given jobs in a system managed by [the RSS], that would ensure the political loyalties of the

[31] The Gaud Swaraswati Brahmin continues to be a source for Hindu nationalist support in Kerala, including among the working-class sections of the community. Several workers in a BMS local unit of headload carriers in Ernakulam, Kerala told me that they were informed about the BMS because of the presence of the RSS in their religious community. 20 October 2016, Ernakulam, Kerala.

workers and their families" a former RSS pracharak reported (Villat 2019). The RSS's initiative attracted the support of some workers, but most remained loyal to the Communist efforts to resist the restructuring. Many of these bidi workers were Ezhava caste Hindus.

In Gujarat, the Sangh established its presence in the early 1940s. The first *shakha* in Gujarat was established by Madhukar Rao Bhagwat, who like Thengadi and Oak, was an upper caste (Brahmin) Maharashtrian RSS *pracharak*.[32] As in Kerala, Sangh Parivar members in Gujarat initially had difficulties expanding their presence in the state (Sud 2012). A border conflict with Pakistan in Gujarat's Kutch region provided a fillip to the Hindu right's hegemony-building in the 1960s. The Sangh Parivar's top brass visited the state after the Chief Minister of Gujarat, Balwantrai Mehta, died after his plane was shot down by the Pakistani Air Force in 1965. Large crowds gathered to hear the fiery speeches of the RSS's chief, M.S. Golwalkar, and Jan Sangh president, Balraj Madhok. The two men called for the establishment of a Hindu *rashtra* (nation) in India. In 1969, riots between Hindus and Muslims erupted in several large cities in Gujarat. Shah (1970a) reports that "the most active participants came from textile workers, manual labourers, and scavengers."

[32] Bhagwat is also the father of the current RSS chief, Mohan Bhagwat

A government commission documented the involvement of the RSS in planning and facilitating violence against Muslims during the riots (Shah 1970b). The incipient restructuring of textile production at the time played an important role in shaping the working-class dimension of the religious rioting. Given that Muslims tended to be employed in higher skilled work, they faced less insecurity from the restructuring than Dalit (formerly "untouchable" caste) workers who were employed in the lower skilled jobs that were either being removed or relocated during the restructuring. The RSS was able to recruit Hindu Dalit textile workers as foot soldiers in the riots of 1969 by scapegoating Muslim workers (Shah 1970b).

Some men among the coterie of BMS's founders in Gujarat, all of whom were either long-time *swayamsevaks* or *pracharaks* of the RSS, were likely involved in the rioting[33] but as an organization, the BMS was focused on building its base in the expanding manufacturing industries in the state. As mentioned above, new industrial corridors had been established and were growing in cities like Vadodara, Saurashtra and Ankleshwar. The BMS set its sights on these areas. While it was the Congress-affiliated union, INTUC, which had the largest presence in the state overall, it was relatively weak in the new manufacturing sectors. Instead, the BMS faced competition from leftist unions like the Communist Party of India (CPI)-affiliate, AITUC, and socialist Hindu Mazdoor

[33] Interview, 13 April 2016, Vadodara, Gujarat. Baskharbhai Thakore informed me that he was arrested in 1969 "because [he] was very active in the RSS." Given that his stomping grounds, Vadodara, were one of the major centers of rioting (after Ahmedabad), it is very likely that his arrest was linked to the rioting.

Sabha (HMS), which was not affiliated to a particular political party but showed allegiances to socialism. AITUC in particular was strong throughout the 1970s since the CPI's support for Prime Minister Indira Gandhi of the Congress Party saved it from the repression meted out to other communist factions at the time. By the 1970s, when the BMS's efforts were beginning to pick up pace in the newly emerging industries in Gujarat, other Sangh groups had taken care of the violent work of drawing boundaries between Hindu and Muslim workers that did share class positions with Hindus in the declining textile industry. Many Muslim workers became self-employed artisans or moved into other precarious forms of work, including farm labor and petty trading. Thus, in the newly emerging manufacturing corridors the BMS, as well as the other unions that were active there, faced a mostly Hindu workforce.

In Gujarat, Muslims also became politically alienated, but through different mechanisms than in Kerala. Unlike Kerala, Muslims were courted by the dominant Congress Party during its reign in Gujarat, which began in the early 20th century and ended in the late 1980s. The place of Muslims in the Congress' support bloc was spelled out in the party's KHAM strategy in the late 1970s. KHAM was an acronym for the motley crew of caste and religious minority groups whose support the Congress sought after suffering a defeat after Indira Gandhi's declaration of Emergency: Kshatriyas[34,] Harijans (the name given

[34] Kshatriyas in Gujarat can refer to different caste groups. Most high-caste Kshatriyas historically belonged to a ruling elite in the western Saurashtra and Kutch regions of the state. Lower-caste Kshatriyas,

to formerly "untouchable" castes by Gandhi), Adivasis (tribal groups), and Muslims. Yet, it was the KHAM strategy that also signaled the downfall of the Congress and consequently, the political marginalization of Muslims. Scholars have suggested that Congress's shallow focus on lower caste groups enabled the Hindu right to gain terrain in Gujarat (Shah 2004, Sanghavi 2010, Basu 2015). For instance, in the 1980s, under the KHAM strategy, an upper caste Congress Member of Parliament and Minister lent support to his fellow elite caste members during a protest of lower castes against atrocities by upper caste Hindus in the northern part of the state. In this period, the BJP had already partially mirrored the Congress's strategy by organizing Harijan and Adivasi cells and thus were able to mobilize support from lower caste groups taking part in the struggle against caste-based violence (Shah 2004).

Thus, in both states, the estrangement between Muslims and the dominant party has created space for different Sangh Parivar members to move into civil society spaces to build support among Hindus in different ways. In the current building phase of Kerala and the past building phase of Gujarat, the BMS organized a predominately Hindu workforce. Furthermore, in both states it is worth noting that the Hindu workers that the BMS was organizing were not in declining sectors. Other Sangh organizations focused on organizing Hindu workers who were in declining sectors. In the case of Kerala, it was the

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who were targeted by the Congress in its KHAM strategy, were historically landless laborers or marginal farmers from central Gujarat.

RSS that tried to take charge of the bidi workers while in Gujarat during the 1980s, it was the RSS, VHP, and some local Sangh offshoots, that established a presence among Hindu textile workers who had lost their jobs and offered them assistance in finding new employment (Shah 2004; Shani 2005; Breman 2004). Because other groups took care of exclusion along religious identity lines, the BMS focused on the workers that labor unions can actually try to protect, i.e., those who are working in sectors that are not declining.

State differences in building hegemony

The BMS is at the vanguard of the Sangh Parivar in Kerala, but in the margins in Gujarat. While the building phases in both state contexts share similarities, there is an important difference in the BMS's position within the right-wing hegemonic bloc in Gujarat and Kerala. Within the Sangh Parivar, the BMS is far better supported by the RSS in Gujarat than in Kerala. I argue that this difference leads to a less stable political articulation of workers' class identities in Gujarat compared to Kerala. I further argue that the difference in the political articulation is structured by the way that religion intersects with class structures in Gujarat compared to Kerala. In this section, I continue the comparison between the building phases of Kerala and Gujarat, but also draw on comparative insights within Gujarat, between the past period of building hegemony and the current period of maintenance to highlight the enduring structural features of the state that have shaped the exercise of right-wing power.

Kerala: Solidarity in the Sangh supports right-wing labor organizing

The BMS in Kerala occupies a "primary position" in the Sangh Parivar (Jayaprasad 1991:210). It is also treated as such by the Sangh's central command, the RSS. The closeness with the RSS allows the BMS to achieve a widespread grassroots presence throughout the state and ensures the union a robust supply of human and material resources to fuel their expansion.

In June 2017, the Sangh Parivar in Kerala organized a press conference after an attack on a BMS office in the city of Cherthala, in Alappuzha district. Leaders and members from the BJP, RSS, and BMS were all present. Alternating pennants of the BMS's symbol of the industrial wheel and gripped sheaf of grain and the BJP's lotus flower adorned the outdoor venue, putting in plain sight the link between the union and the party that is so diligently denied in the official discourse of the BMS. Such clear displays of camaraderie are indeed a rare sight elsewhere in India. Officially, the executive leadership of the BMS prides itself on its political independence, a point that is carefully made in the union's public relations discourse and in the curriculum of the worker education seminars. In Kerala too, the topmost leadership of the BMS would toe the official line that the union operated autonomously from the BJP unlike the other major labor unions in India. Similarly, among the RSS top brass in Kerala, leaders would claim that their organization only guides the ideological mission of the BMS, but it is not involved in more practical matters of how it conducts its work or the nature of its activities. "The BMS is like the married child" explained Santosh, an RSS leader from the organization's state headquarters in Ernakulam district, Kerala. "When you get married, you never really

break ties with your maternal family, but you live your life and must be devoted to your new family. The BMS, BJP, all these organizations, they are the married children of the RSS" he added.[35]

Such claims are dubious. More than merely instilling "family values" in the Sangh Parivar, the RSS also has a hand in determining the level of resources available to its affiliates. The deployment of *pracharaks*, the high-ranking and highly committed full-time members of the RSS cadre, is one way the RSS is able to exercise its influence not just on the ideologies of different Sangh members, but also on its activities and grassroots presence. A more accurate version of Santosh's analogy would thus emphasize the more continual resource transfer made from the Sangh to its married children in the form of *pracharaks* and other more ordinarily committed RSS cadre or volunteers, like *swayamsevaks*.

The RSS allocates its resources to areas that are undergoing expansion. In Kerala, there are three *pracharaks* working as organizing secretaries for the BMS in Kerala: two of whom are devoted to matters in the state and one who oversees organizing activities in the Southern region, in the states of Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Kerala. In addition to *pracharaks*, *swayamsevaks*, are also present throughout the leadership ranks of the BMS in Kerala. The president and vice president of the Palakkad district BMS are long-

[35] Interview 22 October 2016, Ernakulam, Kerala

time RSS *swayamsevaks* who were asked by RSS leaders to volunteer their time to expand the BMS's presence in the district.[36]

The BMS's close relationship to the RSS is a central factor enabling its impressively diffuse geographic presence at the grassroots. When I asked BMS leaders at the state headquarters in Ernakulam how they managed to establish such a geographically diffuse presence throughout the state, they told me, "we can establish ourselves in every district because the RSS is in every district. We go where the RSS goes."[37] Since the RSS works at the neighborhood level through its grassroots network of branches (*shakha*), its *swayamsevaks* are helpful in identifying neighborhoods or pockets that might have a Sangh friendly disposition. This proved to be central to the BMS's membership drive. RSS *swayamsevaks* linked BMS labor organizers to fellow *swayamsevaks* who would be particularly receptive to the BMS because they were already within the Sangh family but had either unionized with a non-BMS union or were not yet unionized.

In Kerala, I found that RSS cadre were also contributing to the union in other ways too. Many of the BMS's impressive offices are state-of-the-art buildings equipped with ample space for holding meetings and accommodating out of town visitors like myself (see Figure 8). At the time of my fieldwork, many of the offices were new constructions or

[36] Interview 7 May 2017, Palakkad, Kerala
[37] Interview, 19 October 2016, Ernakulam, Kerala.

had recently been renovated by architects who are also *swayamsevaks* of the RSS. The BMS has offices in each of the state's fourteen districts.

In addition to the RSS *swayamsevaks* who lend their architectural expertise to the BMS, lawyers who moonlight as BMS volunteers are also particularly useful for the BMS in Kerala given that its workers are often implicated in political violence against Communist cadre. Manikantan, an RSS *swayamsevak* and vice president of the Palakkad chapter of the BMS, earns his living as a criminal lawyer. He told me that he has taken on pro-bono cases to defend BMS members accused in criminal cases arising from clashes with Communists.[38] In Alappuzha district, along with Ashamol[39], three other BMS leaders are also lawyers who joined the Hindu nationalist movement through membership in the RSS affiliated lawyers' association, Akhil Bharatiya Adhivakta Parishad. The man who first organized fishermen workers in Alappuzha, V. Padmanabhan, is also a lawyer and a lifelong activist of the RSS.

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[38] Interview, 7 May 2017, Palakkad, Kerala

[39] Ashamol, was a lawyer in her forties who became a self-described "*pakka Sanghi*" [solid supporter of the Sangh] when she joined the RSS's children's initiative, *Balagokulam*. Ashamol's parents, on the other hand, were "*pakka lal jhanda walas*" [solid "red flag" supporters], registered members of the undivided CPI in the 1950s and 1960s. Through Ashamol's participation in the *Balagokulam* programs and her brothers' participation in RSS *shakhas,* her parents gradually began to abandon their leftist sympathies. Ashamol herself remained within Sangh organizations, moving to become a leader with the Sangh's student wing, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), and then joining the RSS's lawyers' association, the Akhil Bharatiya Adhivakta Parishad upon graduating from law school.

The RSS's imprint is also present among the rank-and-file members of the BMS. In this way, the connection between the two organizations also cements the political articulation of workers' class identities with their identities as Hindu nationalists. In some cases, it is also shaping the political subjectivities of workers to the benefit of the BJP. "I am an RSS activist" proclaimed Kumareshan, a textile worker at the Precot Meridan Mills in Palakkad district who joined the RSS children's branch (*bal shakha*) as a six-year-old. Kumareshan was also proud to come from a large family of card-carrying BJP supporters.[40] Palakkad was the first district in Kerala in which the BJP managed to wrestle control of the municipal government in 2015.

The BMS also acts as a catalyst for shifting political subjectivities in Kerala. Unlike Kumareshan who comes from a family of "RSS interested" people, a group of women workers from a medical glove factory in Palakkad revealed how their membership in the BMS was transforming their political subjectivities in more gradual ways. One of the women's husband was a CITU member and a cardy-carrying Communist. When I asked Shobhana, a 37-year-old Hindu Ezhava woman, if problems arise due to the clashing union allegiances at home, she told me that her husband is supportive of union activities because the BMS had so far been successfully securing wage increases and welfare benefits for its members. Shobhana and the other women admitted that they initially knew little about the RSS but over time they had begun to notice more RSS activities in

[40] Interview, 7 May 2017, Palakkad, Kerala

their neighborhood. Some among them began sending their children to the RSS's *bal shakha*. They also attend Hindu religious events like *pujas* or other celebrations organized by the RSS. "CITU is only for voting, but the RSS does social events and we can attend with our families", said Jayanti, a 40-year-old Hindu Ezhava woman, echoing the "vote-bank" critique commonly imposed on CITU by BMS leaders.[41]

Gujarat: Sidelining by the Sangh makes right-wing labor organizing difficult

In Gujarat, the BMS's presence was historically established in five regional offices that covered two to three neighboring regions. According to BMS leaders in Kerala, their diffuse geographical presence simply reflects the RSS's own geographical diffusion. Interestingly, the RSS is organized similarly in Gujarat and Kerala (and in other Indian states), but in Gujarat, the BMS's presence is sparser than the RSS's. This has important implications for unity within the Sangh Parivar and consequently, the stability of the political articulation that the BMS is trying to forge between Hindu nationalism and workers' class identities.

In Gujarat, the BMS's state headquarters are located in a small, run-down residential building in Ahmedabad's Maninagar neighborhood. In Vadodara, where the union has the largest base in the whole of Gujarat, the BMS's office is also housed in a small, modest building in the working-class industrial neighborhood of Raopura (see Figure 7).

[41] Interview 8 May 2017, Palakkad, Kerala.

The RSS once shared the Raopura office[42] with the BMS in Vadodara. The RSS has since moved its offices to the up-scale residential neighborhood of Akota while the BMS has stayed in its original digs. Thus, over time, there has been an estrangement between the BMS and the other organizations in the Sangh Parivar in Gujarat.

This has consequences for the BMS's work of both building and maintaining the political articulation of the Hindu national citizen worker in Gujarat. In Kerala, the widespread presence of the BMS facilitates closer connections between rank-and-file members and union leaders. The well-resourced BMS offices in Kerala also provide the space for holding meetings within the Sangh Parivar, since events are often planned and held in concert with other Hindu nationalist organizations.

In Gujarat, by contrast, BMS leaders and members who aren't located in close proximity to one of the regional offices often have to travel much greater distances to attend meetings. A BMS leader from Halol, an emerging industrial hub located around forty kilometers from Vadodara, complained about the long distances and time it took to travel to the Vadodara office to attend meetings. Compared to the cooperation between Sangh members in Kerala, in Gujarat BMS leaders complained of neglect from the RSS and the BJP. In Kerala, party activists from the BJP routinely support the BMS in its organizing

[42]Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi bunked together in the Raopura office with Baskarbhai Thakore when the two of them were RSS pracharks in the late 1970s. Raopura and its adjacent neighborhood of Salatwada have also been a hotbed of communal rioting in Vadodara.

efforts. During the June 2017 membership drive, BJP members from the party's Dalit unit provided BMS organizers with voter lists and joined them in several campaign events, including door-knocking and tabling for the BMS at events organized by the BJP.

In Gujarat, BMS leaders often bemoaned the lack of support they received from the BJP and the RSS in their locality. "No one [in the Sangh] really pays attention to us here" Hussainbhai admitted bitterly.[43] In a story from Hussainbhai's early years as a BMS full-timer, Hussainbhai revealed that their current difficulties in attaining support from the rest of the Sangh had some historical precedents:

> We had given a call to workers to go on strike. Just imagine, the workers were ready, we had all assumed positions on the picket that morning and all of a sudden, I get a call from one of our senior leaders, who himself had gotten a call from the RSS. 'Call off the strike' he says. And that was the end of that. This brother [pointing to Baskarbhai] had the same experience with petrochemical workers. See, the RSS guys are running industries, driving around in four-wheelers, so what do they want from the workers from the BMS, those of us who roam about in two-wheelers? They won't come close to the BMS.[44]

[43] Interview, 13 April 2016, Vadodara, Gujarat.
[44] Interview, 10 May 2016, Vadodara, Gujarat

I argue that there is a structural dynamic that compels the RSS to be more grasping in Gujarat and generous in Kerala that in turn leads to the more marginal role of the BMS in the building phase of Gujarat in the past compared to Kerala today. In Kerala, the BMS is organizing mostly Hindu workers against employers in a context where employers are weakly organized and more religiously diverse than in Gujarat. Thus, for the RSS, empowering the BMS poses less of a threat to the Sangh Parivar's hegemonic claims of universality on the plane of Hindu nationalism. In Gujarat, by contrast, the bourgeoisie is predominately Hindu and has had strong links to the ruling party. These linkages become especially problematic for the BMS when the BJP comes to power, as we shall see in the following chapter. However, even in the building phase of hegemony in Gujarat, the RSS found support among Hindu capitalists in Gujarat as Hussainbhai revealed above. For the BMS, this meant that its efforts to build ties with workers in a way that affirmed their class power were sometimes constrained, especially if workers expressed a desire to go on strike or disrupt production in a Hindu owned, RSS-aligned factory. This has posed difficulties for the BMS since they often found themselves powerless in the face of "the men of the RSS [who] are no small fish, they are *bade log* and *badmash log* [big people and bad people]!"

The class tension that Hussainbhai describes above becomes more pronounced in the maintenance phase of hegemonic consolidation, but it has always existed in Gujarat. On the one hand, the intersection of religious communities and class structures might appear to be conducive to forging Hindu nationalist unity across classes since there is a predominately Hindu bourgeoisie and a predominately Hindu working class, both

represented by organizations within the Sangh Parivar. Yet, as we see above, this also lays bare the class contradiction that is inherent in hegemonic efforts to forge unity across classes, within the constructed community of Hindu nationals. Moreover, in Gujarat's building phase, the BMS was expanding in the organized manufacturing sectors, where very few Muslim workers were employed. Thus, for the BMS and the Sangh, mobilizing workers during the building phase of hegemony meant that they could try to incorporate workers into Hindu nationalism without explicitly drawing boundaries between Hindu and Muslim workers. While this allowed BMS leaders to avoid the risky work of antagonizing Muslims, it also meant that when class conflicts arose, they arose as class tensions between Hindu workers and Hindu capitalists and had to be resolved as such, without the ability to readily use disunity between Hindu and Muslims to support these efforts.

Conclusion

The BMS in Kerala emphasizes workers' class positions and affirms their political power by participating in institutions like the labor welfare boards, which were successful outcomes of earlier labor movement struggles organized under the auspices of the Communists. In Gujarat, even in the absence of a strong leftward pull, BMS leaders in the past similarly emphasized the class positions of workers and affirmed workers' agency by leading strikes against employers, despite the doctrinal rejection of class struggle in the Sangh Parivar. Thus, in both contexts where the right-wing is building hegemony, the BMS does not cloak itself in an exclusively cultural interpretation of Hindu nationalism.

Instead, BMS leaders have sought to incorporate workers onto a universal plane of Hindu nationalism by claiming to be better defenders of the material interests of workers compared to competitors in the labor movement. Regardless of the existing traditions or prevailing political culture in the labor movement, in the building phase of hegemony, BMS leaders attempt to organize workers by appealing to their material concerns and empowering them on the basis of their class positions. BMS leaders organize workers in this way even if it means opposing some of the core tenets of Hindu nationalism, including the ideological rejection of class struggle as part of the movement's claim of unity across class lines. As the comparison between Kerala and Gujarat illustrates, more than the influence of dominant traditions of class politics which differs greatly across the two state contexts, it is the temporal phase of building hegemony that explains how and why the right-wing mobilizes workers in a similarly "progressive" way that seeks to empower workers as both valued members of the Hindu nation and as inputs in economic production who are entitled to be materially rewarded as such.

By way of concluding this chapter, it is worth noting that the difference in the individual and institutional articulations of the Hindu nationalist citizen-worker seen in the building phases in Gujarat's past and in Kerala's contemporary context has important implications in the maintenance phase of hegemonic consolidation. In Gujarat, the generation of BMS leaders whose identities represent the intersected identity of the working class-Hindu national is diminishing in size. Moreover, the work of inculcating Hindu nationalism among rank-and-file members of the BMS, which has historically been a responsibility

held by individuals and scantily supported by the RSS, especially in comparison to Kerala, becomes harder to maintain in Gujarat. In the absence of a wider institutional synergy, when individual leaders pass away, retire, or become less relevant organizers in other ways, it becomes harder for the BMS to maintain the articulation of Hindu nationalism and working-class identities. This suggests that the institutional synergy in Kerala may support a more thorough articulation and stable hegemony than in Gujarat if the right-wing is ever able to make space for itself at the helm of state power.

Chapter 4: Maintaining Hindu Nationalist Hegemony: The BMS in Gujarat (1990 to the present)

Overview of Chapter

Despite the more marginal position of the BMS in the Sangh Parivar's efforts to build hegemony in Gujarat compared to Kerala, the right-wing hegemonic bloc in Gujarat successfully captured state power and transitioned to maintaining hegemony in the state when the BJP won elections in 1995. The BJP has remained in power since then and Gujarat is widely considered to be one of the strongest citadels of the Hindu right-wing in India today. In this chapter, I argue that beneath the seeming stillness of right-wing hegemony in Gujarat, important undercurrents of class tension that have always existed are now beginning to surface in a way that is difficult for the leaders of the Hindu right's hegemonic bloc to ignore. These tensions first formed around the fractured position within the Sangh Parivar on the question of economic liberalization during the late 1990s and early 2000s and have since spread to the BJP's claims around Gujarat's economic development under the leadership of Narendra Modi from 2002 to 2014.

My findings show that in the period of hegemonic maintenance, the BMS in Gujarat has become a more rigid and disciplinarian version of its former, more ideologically nimble and "progressive" self. Today, BMS leaders in Gujarat spend little time expanding the union's existing base and instead focus on keeping a lid on class conflict in the high-profit manufacturing sector. While during the building phase, the BMS more explicitly emphasized the material entitlements of its members based on class positions and were even willing to defy Hindu nationalist commitments to opposing class conflict for the purpose of empowering workers, today BMS leaders try to use Hindu nationalism more

coercively against their own members. To explain this shift in the BMS's orientation, I draw on the concept of the "totalitarian policy" (Gramsci 1971b). Gramsci's elaboration of the "totalitarian policy" is helpful for understanding how parties leading hegemonic projects try to resolve the tension that arises when "individuals belong to more than one private association, and often to associations which are objectively in contradiction to one another" (Gramsci 1971b:264–65).

The "objective contradiction" that is in focus in this chapter is the constraint that is placed on the BJP when it becomes the ruling party and inherits the responsibility of ensuring that economic growth proceeds without major disruptions. This aim can lead to conflicts with other Sangh organizations who may feel that their aims – to assert the dominance of Hindus in the cultural sphere or to secure better material conditions for Hindu workers, for instance – become subordinated to the party's focus on smooth economic governance. In this situation, the ruling party may attempt to centralize power by "breaking all the threads that bind members to extraneous cultural organisms" or "destroying all other organizations" and placing itself at the center of society(Gramsci 1971b:264–65). I argue Narendra Modi pursued this type of "totalitarian" strategy in order to steady the BJP's initially unstable hold on state power. While the strategy was initially successful in stabilizing power, it has strained the relationship between the BJP and the other members of the Sangh, especially the BMS. The union has been sidelined within the Sangh Parivar, resulting in a situation where right-wing power in Gujarat has become strong, but unstable.

The chapter is organized into the following sections. The first section outlines the transition from building to maintaining hegemony in Gujarat and highlights how the BJP tried to smooth over key tensions within the Sangh Parivar during its initial ascent to state power from 1995 to 2002. I focus in particular on the labor unrest that emerged in response to economic liberalization in the late 1990s and how the BMS attempted to resolve these tensions by relying on a layer of rank-and-file members that are elevated within the union as representatives. In the second section, I highlight how the BMS's attempts to contain workers' discontent through its union representatives has become less successful in recent years as insecurity around material conditions have increased for even this relatively creamy layer of the BMS's membership. I demonstrate how under the totalitarian policy, the BMS's attempts to discipline workers has led to diluted commitments to Hindu nationalism among workers and in some cases has even eroded the basis of political support for the BJP government and the RSS.

In the third section, I show that there is thin support for the RSS among workers in the BMS. In this fragile hegemonic context, while the BMS is unlikely to singlehandedly dethrone the BJP in Gujarat, counter-hegemonic groups are making inroads among BMS workers which may further weaken the already fractured Sangh Parivar bloc in the state.

The smooth surface of Hindu nationalist hegemony in Gujarat

A snapshot of the social and political life of Gujarat today could easily give the impression that Hindu right-wing hegemony is proceeding smoothly. Not only has the BJP enjoyed uninterrupted reign in the parliamentary arena since 1995, but the party's fellow Sangh Parivar members have also established a strong presence in the state's civil

society. The Sangh Parivar has built a strong civil society presence through its farmers' wing, the BKS, by implanting RSS cadre in caste organizations, as well as in several major cooperative associations in Gujarat, including dairy, housing and sports (Basu 2015). In the labor movement, the BMS is the largest of the lot of India's major national-level labor union federations (see Table 3). The BMS has maintained the presence it built in the state's high-profit manufacturing sector, especially in industries like petro-chemicals, auto parts, and electrical engineering. The RSS and BJP are both close to the state's industrial bourgeoisie and thus, alongside the BMS, contribute to the in-house" representation of labor and capital within the Sangh Parivar.

The BMS's largest base is in Vadodara, Gujarat. Vadodara district emerged as one of the major corridors of industrial production in Gujarat in the 1970s (See Chapter 3). Along the twenty kilometer stretch of highway that connects the Vadodara city center, where the BMS's office is located, to the district's industrial hinterlands, one can find dozens of large factories. Company shuttles careen down the highway at least three times a day to bring busloads of factory workers to their shifts or to relieve them from their daily toil. The BMS has a presence in several of these units, but its largest memberships are in the auto parts industry, at Apollo, a tire factory and Munjal Auto, which produces mufflers and brakes, and in the cable factory of Ram Ratna Kabel.

Vadodara is representative of the image of Gujarat that became the basis for the state's namesake "model" of development, championed by BJP politician Narendra Modi. The main pillars of this model included relatively labor-intensive manufacturing, reliable

infrastructure, easily accessible rural lands for industrial development, and good (corruption-free) governance. These promises resonated with capitalists in India and abroad. Modi quickly became the darling of the business community. The Economist magazine, for instance, marveled that "so many things work properly in Gujarat, that it hardly feels like India." The state's economy could offer a "glimpse of a possible industrial future" for the rest of the country, it suggested.

Modi was especially celebrated for his eagerness to attract capital, which was made especially public when he enticed the Indian industrial titan, Ratan Tata, to move his newly constructed automobile factory almost 2,000 kilometers from West Bengal to Gujarat. Modi was less attentive towards that other important input in capitalist production, labor. When Modi did make references to labor, he did so in terms that would appeal to capitalists. Modi brandished Gujarat's reputation for industrial peace, promising capitalists an industrial relations environment notable for the "complete cooperation between industry and the workforce" and "almost no man-days lost" due to strikes or lockouts (The Indian Express 2012).

My initial visits to the BMS office in Vadodara seemed to confirm Modi's portrayal of Gujarat.

The spirited, cycle-riding, tire-slashing, *kala haath* militants who worked so vigorously to build Hindu nationalist hegemony in Gujarat had now become slumbering septuagenarians whose biggest struggle seemed to be sneaking in an afternoon nap under the constant creak of the ceiling fans in the BMS's run-down office. "Everything is

running smoothly" they said. Workers at the Apollo Tire factory, one of the BMS's biggest units in Gujarat, had just secured a sizable increase in their monthly pay. Even at the lower end of the pay-scale, daily wage earners at a pickle factory had recently earned increases through the BMS's negotiations. The union leaders' claim that their members were happy was further affirmed by the absence of workers at the BMS office, which was open daily in case members needed to discuss difficulties at work.

On the occasions where I did encounter some of the youthful bands of factory workers who make up the BMS's membership in Vadodara, they seemed like they could have been poster children for the Gujarat model of development. Almost all of the BMS's members I met were Hindu, and a vast majority of them from dominant caste backgrounds. They earn salaries that are above the minimum wage, and in addition to their wage labor, they count on additional income from land ownership or small businesses. They are well-educated and often overqualified for factory work, equipped with the latest smartphones and have access to their own vehicles (most often motorcycles) for each adult male member of the household. Many live in modest but modern homes, in joint family arrangements where patrilineal generations pool their resources. Many of the younger BMS members had family members who were also part of the union.

Containing class conflict through elevated union representatives

Even when problems did arise, the BMS seemed to be able to handle workers' discontent and maintain their commitments to Hindu nationalism. In June 2000, around 7,000

petrochemical workers in Gujarat walked off their jobs to protest the central government's decision to disinvest from the Indian Petrochemicals Corporation Limited (IPCL) (Times of India 2000). The IPCL had been in operation in Vadodara since the early 1970s and was its first petrochemicals complex. The Vadodara plant manufactured a range of products including polymers, chemical products, and fibers. The BMS established a local unit, the IPCL Employees Association, in the Vadodara complex in 1973.

The BMS participated in the strike along with the centrist INTUC (affiliated to the Congress Party) and the leftist AITUC (affiliated to the Communist Party of India, CPI) units that were also in the factory. The unions mounted a concerted effort to pressure the government to pull back on disinvestment. The striking workers demanded a meeting with the Minister of Petrochemicals, Suresh Prabhu, who served the BJP government of Vajpayee at the national level, but their request was denied. In addition to the strike, BMS workers tried to enter the bidding competition for the government's equity shares in IPCL. The BMS's bid was not even formally registered. In 2002, Reliance Petroinvestments, a private company owned by Indian billionaire Mukesh Ambani, one of Narendra Modi's many admirers within Indian business circles, won the bid.

In 2003, the BMS's local, the IPCL Employees Association, produced a pamphlet entitled "Disinvestment: A Stab Unto Democracy." In it, the workers bemoaned the "pains of nationalist labor" and accused the government of betraying its democratic commitment to workers in favor of the "capitalistic lobby of the country." There was a

sense of betrayal by the government, who the workers accused of paying little regard to the dedicated efforts of "nationalist labor who … boosted up a huge public sector undertaking to international and national reputation."

A decade after the publication of the pamphlet, when I interviewed BMS workers who were involved in the disinvestment struggle in 2013, they were still bitter about the government's treatment of workers. Jignesh Majmudar, a man in his late forties who joined the IPCL as a technician in 1986 and was a leader in the BMS's fight against state disinvestment, rebuked the government for its arrogance and its dismissive attitude towards workers:

> When I am raising these issues [around disinvestment] as a citizen of India, the 'intelligent' people in government say: "trade unions block traffic, trade unions beat each other up, trade unions don't understand anything. We [the government] are the power of this country, we are the intelligent ones. You don't know anything because you are a worker"
>
> NO! We know everything boss, but you don't hear us![45]

The BMS's struggle against state disinvestment highlights a central dynamic in the maintenance of hegemony. On the one hand, the BMS seems to have successfully

[45] Interview, 13 August 2013, Vadodara, Gujarat.

incorporated workers into a political articulation that supports Hindu nationalist hegemony. Majmudar, a worker, identifies as a "citizen" whose class struggle is against the Indian state (who he unintentionally calls "boss"). His political subjectivity as a worker "transcends the corporate limits of the purely economic class", a hallmark of the advanced moment of collective consciousness Gramsci associates with hegemony (Gramsci 1971b:181). Yet, even as groups transcend the limits of their class to identify with the larger social interests or "historic tasks" set by the leaders of the hegemonic bloc, this does not amount to the erasure of difference between the dominated and the dominant. Conflicts between these groups will persist even in the advanced phases of hegemonic struggles. Thus, the task of maintaining hegemony requires the capacity to subordinate groups in a way that allows dominated groups to elaborate their own lives, but "in a language and political space defined by [the dominant] (Hall 2016:171). The BMS, offers the Hindu right a mechanism of this sort of sophisticated domination. Workers are subordinated by the inherent inequality of capitalist class structures but are given a voice through their Hindu nationalist commitments as members of the BMS.

In the struggle against disinvestment at IPCL, the BMS provided an outlet for workers to express their concerns about livelihood insecurity and even a chance to take ownership of production. Yet, the BMS was also more concerned with preserving a sense of unity within the Sangh Parivar and enshrining national interest. In the discourse around the struggle, the BMS refrains from directly criticizing the BJP governments who were in power at both the state and national levels. Nowhere in the BMS's protest pamphlet are the party or the leaders who were responsible for disinvestment named explicitly. Other

aspects of the BMS's struggle – such as entering a bidding war that they had no hope of winning or publishing their pamphlet well after the sale to Reliance was already finalized – also suggest that some of the sharper edges of workers' discontent might have been blunted through the BMS.

In fact, though he was enraged himself, Majmudar represents one mechanism used by the BMS for dampening workers' discontent: rank-and-file workers who are elevated to a status of union representative, or *pratinidhi*. As a *pratinidhi*, Majmudar straddled the world between the BMS leaders and his fellow rank-and-file workers on the shopfloor. In the BMS's organizational structure, each workplace unit of the union has a small team of *pratinidhi* who not only relay practical information to other union members, but also act as conduits for spreading the tenets of Hindu nationalism more widely among the rank-and-file base. The first crop of *pratinidhi* in a newly established BMS local unit tend to emerge organically among the small group of workers who initiated contact with the BMS. Over time, BMS leaders also select those who they deem to be particularly receptive to the union's Hindu nationalist ideology (often younger workers) to attend special worker education and training seminars that are organized by the BMS to teach workers about the BMS's history, legacy, and its position with the Sangh Parivar. *Pratinidhi* are thus more exposed to the Hindu nationalist doctrine than the rest of the BMS rank-and-file.

Pratinidhi are "selected not elected" and as such tend to remain in their relatively privileged positions for several years. Ideally, they are meant to develop a strong rapport

with the BMS's executive leadership and are well-versed in the union's ideology. *Pratinidhi* also tend to be of upper or otherwise dominant caste backgrounds, and especially in the case of high-profit manufacturing sectors like petrochemicals, are most often men with relatively high levels of educational attainment. Majmudar and his friend, Jitendra Joshi, had been pratinidhi for the BMS's local at Reliance (formerly IPCL) since the mid 1990s. Joshi, an upper caste (Brahmin) grew up in Dahod, a district in Gujarat's tribal belt and moved to Vadodara after earning a diploma in engineering. He started working at the IPCL refinery in the mid 1980s. He joined the union shortly after starting work and spoke articulately and passionately about the BMS's Hindu nationalist ideology. I asked him whether his belief was put into question since the privatization at IPCL – "a stab unto democracy" as the BMS workers saw it – was ushered in by a fellow Hindu nationalist member of the Sangh, the BJP. After all, not only was the BJP in power in Gujarat and at the national level, but the latter was also most enthusiastic about pursuing privatization as one of the channels for India's liberal market reforms. The BJP government of Atul Vajpayee led the privatization of several major public sector enterprises and even established a separate Ministry of Disinvestment in 1999. Joshi reconciled the tension between the party and the union by subordinating the individual struggles of the BMS to the loftier aim of national development:

> The BMS is not just an activity, it's a whole thought process! Just try to understand this simple thing, then you can understand the BMS! We are not in the business of routinely demanding higher wages like the other 'bread and butter' unions. That is a marginal part of our activity… Our whole thought process is

> oriented towards the uplift of the nation, towards putting our nation at the top globally.[46]

In Gujarat, the BMS has installed a layer of *pratinidhi* in its most important units. In factories like the former IPCL plant where *pratinidhi* like Joshi and Majmudar have long served the BMS, they enjoy the benefit of having reduced shop floor responsibilities and operate in almost a quasi-managerial position.

Having *pratinidhi* with such unswerving commitments to Hindu nationalism in place is helpful for BMS executive leaders because they can provide a first line of defense against potentially restive rank-and-file workers. As "junior partners" in the hegemonic bloc, the BMS's full-time leaders are themselves under a fair amount of pressure from the top brass of the Sangh Parivar to whom they are ideologically and politically accountable, the capitalists with whom they must negotiate, as well as their rank-and-file base, in whose eyes they must remain legitimate defenders of workers' interests. *Pratinidhi* can alleviate some of this pressure from the BMS's leadership by outsourcing the work of maintaining legitimacy to worker-leaders who have closer links to the base. Their close working proximity and overlapping interests with other workers based on their shared class positions, coupled with their heightened awareness of Hindu nationalist ideology mean that *pratinidhi* can serve as key supports for BMS leaders who are attempting to maintain

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[46] Interview, 13 August 2013, Vadodara, Gujarat.

the articulation of workers' class identities with their identification with Hindu nationalism. These union representatives form a class of "organic intellectuals" for right-wing hegemony by acting as a buffer against potential flare-ups of discontent on the shop floor.

The BMS was able to contain their members discontent around disinvestment in the IPCL struggle. Yet, the IPCL case uncovers a deep fault line in the Hindu right-wing's hegemony, which I argue is particularly pronounced in Gujarat and has become similarly accentuated at the national level since 2014 when Modi stepped into power as India's Prime Minister. To unearth this fissure in right-wing power, the next section examines the history of the right's seemingly steady hold on power in Gujarat.

Breaking threads with the BMS under Modi's totalitarian take-over

Indeed, behind the apparent "universality" of Hindu nationalist organizations in Gujarat's civil and political society, the right's capture of power has been riddled with persistent tensions. The BJP captured state power in the 1995 state elections in Gujarat. At the time, the BJP was dealing with a leadership crisis that was not completely resolved even though the party won the elections in 1995. From 1995 to 2001, the BJP shuffled three different Chief ministers in and out of office, until it finally settled on Narendra Modi in 2001. Modi's brash leadership style quieted some opposition within the BJP, but tensions emanating from other sections of the Sangh Parivar were harder to resolve. Top leaders from the RSS and the Sangh's religious organization, the VHP, which had gained vanguard status within the hegemonic bloc in the 1980s and 1990s (see Chapter 2),

criticized Modi for his commandeering, power-hungry style and questioned his commitment to Hindu nationalist ideology (Basu 2015).

Gordhan Zadaphia, the head of the VHP, was concerned that Modi's eagerness to stay in power would compromise his commitment to the Sangh's Hindu nationalist objectives, which might require more radical and violent strategies than would be allowed by the moderating impulse of parliamentary politics. Many scholars argue, however, that by sanctioning the horrific violence against Muslims during the Gujarat riots of 2002, Modi offered a gruesome reassurance of his commitment to Hindu nationalism's cultural agenda of asserting Hindu supremacy over religious minorities (Basu 2015; Dhattiwala and Biggs 2012; Jaffrelot 2019b; Ruparelia, Reddy, and Harris 2011).

Modi was re-elected in the aftermath of the riots of 2002, but still his detractors within the Sangh were not entirely convinced about his commitments to other dimensions of Hindu nationalism (Jaffrelot 2013). The VHP's Zadaphia continued to lambast Modi for catering to elite economic interests, accused him of selling out to big business, suppressing trade union activity, and neglecting the problem of youth unemployment (Basu 2015). The Sangh's farmers' wing, the BKS, echoed Zadaphia's criticism and accused the Modi government of appropriating land to serve the interests of big business and neglecting rural underdevelopment and the plight of poor farmers (Basu 2015). The BMS also added to this chorus of critical voices within the Sangh. Most of its senior leaders at the time were men who were aligned to the pro-*swadeshi* camp of the Sangh Parivar. BMS leaders were disappointed that the Gujarat's BJP, which Modi had culled

through to remove dissenting voices, was full of people with the "wrong" mindset.[47] In their view, it was no wonder that they received so little support from the BJP compared to Kerala (see Chapter 3).

It was after Modi's "totalitarian" takeover of the BJP in the early 2000s that he pivoted towards a more developmentalist platform. The BMS could have been an ideal partner for the BJP's developmental agenda. Not only did it have the potential to deliver an organized bloc of BJP voters, but its Hindu nationalist commitment to abstaining from strikes were very much in line with the "complete cooperation" and "no man-days lost" emphasized by Modi in his courting of capital to Gujarat. Yet despite these affinities, Modi did not tap into the BMS as a potential source of organized support.

Instead, he attempted to "break the threads" that connected the BJP to the BMS and other groups who had become critical of his Hindu nationalist commitments through the anti-liberalization struggle. Modi's first attempt at breaking the thread between the BMS and the BJP occurred in 2001 when he levied criticism at the juggernaut Hindu nationalist labor leader and BMS founder, Thengadi. Observers within the BJP suggested that Modi's critical stance towards Thengadi was an early indication of what would become a mainstay of Modi's rule in Gujarat: in matters of the economy, "the RSS's progenies must not be indulged" (Ramaseshan 2020).

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[47] Interview, 13 April 2016, Vadodara, Gujarat.

Rather than indulging the BMS as a junior partner in hegemony who could assist in cementing workers' consent, Modi attempted to render the union "extraneous" and placed itself at the center, as the "sole regulator" of right-wing hegemony in Gujarat (Gramsci 1971b:265). Modi tried to replace "all the satisfactions that [workers] formerly found [in the BMS]" by posturing as the prime agent of Gujarat's economic development.

From most perspectives on Gujarat's political economy, Modi's snub to labor is unsurprising. In the comparative scholarship on India's developmental states, an enduring feature of class politics in Gujarat has been a strong link between capital and the state (Kohli 2012b; Sinha 2005). Both regimes maintained a close relationship with the state's highly organized and politically powerful bourgeoisie at the expense of labor. Many scholars argue that the BJP's rule in Gujarat has just been a continuation of the Congress's rule, with the extra boost of political legitimacy afforded by neoliberalism.

I argue, however, that Modi's neglect of labor should not be reduced to an enduring feature of Gujarat's elite class politics. Rather, the marginal role of the BMS is the outcome of a deliberate process of marginalization in response to the potential for labor to disrupt Modi's hold on power. Indeed, in 2011 as Modi was readying himself to waltz on the national stage as India's "man of development" (*vikas purush*), Gujarat's industrial relations climate was in a state of fervent. In April 2011, 500 auto workers from a General Motors factory in Halol, Gujarat walked off their jobs and struck work for almost a month, making it one of the longest strikes in the state's recent history (Rupera 2013).

The workers demanded permanent contracts for temporary workers and protested against mounting production pressures and the lack of overtime pay. In October 2012, 1,500 workers walked off the factory floor at Apollo Tyres in Vadodara to protest the company's unwillingness to recognize the BMS. The strike was declared illegal by the Modi government. From 2010 to 2012, Gujarat counted over seventy strikes with over seven thousand workers participating resulting in a loss that was well above the "no-man days lost" claimed by Modi.

In other words, rather than reflecting weakness, I argue, the BJP's political neglect of the BMS is reflective of the union's power. When workers' discontent emerges from the internal chambers of the Sangh, it is a particularly troublesome reverberation for Hindu right-wing power. The BMS's potential to disrupt right-wing power stems from the fact that the struggles of its workers are similar to the struggles of workers unionized with other unions. Modi's response to the Apollo strike makes this clear. He declared it illegal like most of the other major episodes of labor unrest. Under Modi's totalitarian policy, offering the BMS and its workers a privileged status to reinforce the unity within the Sangh and the legitimacy of Hindu nationalist hegemony was out of the question.

To a certain extent, Modi's totalitarian strategy has worked to keep labor tethered to Hindu right-wing hegemony without the support of the BMS. Modi was able to secure a fairly wide basis of cross-class and cross-caste support in Gujarat, which also included upwardly mobile sections of historically marginalized Hindu caste groups later in his tenure (Basu 2015; Kohli 2012b; Shah 1998b). Scholars have found that lower and

middle caste informal workers identify the BJP with development (Desai 2015; Desai and Roy 2016). I found that there is also support for the BJP as a talisman for development from the more privileged sections of the workforce that the BMS represents.

As Ganubhai Bharward, a worker and *pratinidhi* from the BMS's unit at the Apollo Tyres, an Indian multinational tire company that opened its factory gates in Gujarat in 1991, put it:

> I've liked Mr. Modi a lot from the beginning because, there's been so much development in Gujarat because of him. He's done a lot of really good things. Right now, these roads that you're traveling on, they weren't like this before. … As far as industries are concerned, you'll find most of them in Gujarat. In other states you won't find as many because the way you are able to sit here freely, you cannot do so in other places, like Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Jharkhand [poorer northern Indian states reputed to have law and order problems]. In these states, for girls, there are a lot of problems. Go anywhere in Gujarat, and you won't face this type of concern.

The pitfalls of the BJP's totalitarianism

Ganubhai's assessment of development in Gujarat reads like a page out of the BJP's promotional material. Yet, his appraisal of Gujarat's development is primarily infrastructural. His class experiences of development are alienated from his assessment. When I asked Ganubhai to describe how he has personally experienced development as a

worker in Gujarat's booming manufacturing sector, he revealed a sense of insecurity around sustaining his living standards.

> I was born in a *jhopda* [shanty housing] and we continued to live in a house like that even after my younger brother was born. Our status improved when my father's cattle herding brought in more money. Now, I make a higher salary[48] than my father but I'm unable to move up in life, even just a little. I make a high salary, maybe, but my expenses are just as high. At the end of the day, I can't put anything away for savings.

Indeed, "*mehengai bardh rahi hai*" [the cost of living is rising] was perhaps the most frequently repeated lamentation I heard from workers. This is corroborated by data on real wages in the manufacturing sector, which show a declining trend between 2000 and 2010 (Research Unit for Political Economy 2012). Furthermore, wages as a share of value added in the formal manufacturing sector have also been declining, suggesting that even in profitable sectors, workers are not benefiting as much as they are contributing to production (Research Unit for Political Economy 2012). In other contexts, the BJP has been able to maintain its elite economic agenda while also acquiring a mass base of poor voters through the charitable wings of the Sangh Parivar who provide material concessions to the poor (Chidambaram 2012; Thachil 2014). In the case of manufacturing

[48] Ganubhai told me he makes 33,000 INR a month; At RRK the Salary for permanent workers ranged from 9,000 to 17,000 INR a month. The minimum wage set by the Government of Gujarat in 2016 was just over 8,000 for skilled workers in the manufacturing sector.

workers in Gujarat, however, this is not possible. The welfare concessions that would be necessary to quell the concern of manufacturing workers who are unionized with the BMS are far costlier than the social services provided on a voluntaristic basis and cannot be resolved without redistribution from capital to labor.

I found that the rising cost of living was also beginning to erode support for the BJP even among its most organic supporters. "What has the Modi government ever done for workers? He promised a lot, but nothing has come of it" said Rahul Parekh, a 26-year-old BMS member, from the upper caste Bania community. When I first met him, he described himself as a "*pakka BJP admi*" – a solid BJP supporter – but had since conceded a number of times that his confidence in the BJP was beginning to falter. Rahul was also a new generation *pratinidhi* of the BMS. While the *pratinidhi* of the BMS's unit at the former IPCL (now Reliance) plant came of age politically in a context where anti-liberalization voices within the Sangh Parivar could ring louder, Rahul's political subjectivities were largely shaped in a context where Modi's totalitarian policy quieted voices of criticism and amplified only those who upheld him as the high priest of economic development and progress.

Another wrinkle in the maintenance of right-wing hegemony in Gujarat is the growing number of contract workers in manufacturing, especially in the sectors considered to be key engines of economic growth. Precise figures are difficult to come by, but around 30% to 60% of workers in the manufacturing sector are estimated to be hired on a temporary basis. While contract workers are paid far less and cannot avail of the same benefits as

formal workers, in the past decade in Gujarat and elsewhere in India, there have been several instances of workers uniting across the formal-informal divide to protest their deteriorating working and living conditions. This is often strategic as formally employed permanent workers understand that leveraging their class power against employers will be difficult without the support of a growing majority of shop floor workers. At the same time, I found that many BMS members also subjectively identified with the precarious conditions of formal workers even if their objective material conditions were much higher. In the case of formal workers in newer factories like Apollo, many BMS members started work in precarious conditions, hired as temps, apprentices or through labor sub-contractors and thus had only recently been converted to permanent status. These workers had little confidence in the sustainability of their permanency. Indeed, in many cases, it was a fear of downward mobility on the part of permanent workers that inspired a sense of solidarity with contract workers. While many young BMS formal members would acknowledge that their consumption profiles had improved compared to their fathers' generation –as young adults, they all had access to their own motorcycles, for instance, while their forebears were only afforded such a luxury much later in their adult lives— they also expressed a deep sense of insecurity in sustaining their standards of living in the face of rising costs.

In the formal manufacturing sector, there is much ambiguity around the inclusion of contract workers in the BMS. In fact, this was perhaps one of the most contentious issues between the new generation *pratinidhi* and BMS leaders. While the *pratinidhi* want to push for the inclusion of contract workers in order to shore up the power of the union,

BMS leaders are reluctant to formally register contract workers. I found that the conflict around contract workers led some BMS workers to question their union leaders' commitment to advancing the interests of workers and in some instances, also their Hindu nationalism. During the BMS worker education seminar organized in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, I overheard a *pratinidhi* from the BMS's unit at the Munjal Auto manufacturing factory in Vadodara, Mahindrabhai Chauhan, 37, complain:

> How can we keep shouting 'Bharat Mata ki Jai' [long live Mother India] when our fellow brothers working on contracts are standing right next to us getting ripped off and we're not doing anything to help them?[49]

In other moments too, workers subvert their leaders' attempts to use Hindu nationalism as a force for discipline. At a strike organized by BMS *pratinidhi* to protest the unfair dismissal of contract workers, many of the workers began chanting one of the BMS's main slogans: *tyag, tapasya, aur balidan*! This slogan is inspired by the BMS' rendition of the Hindu mythical character of Vishwakarma (see Chapter 2) and asks workers to sacrifice (*tyag* and *balidan*) their "selfish" class needs for the greater good of national development in an act of selflessness (*tapasya*). One BMS rank-and-file worker, Kamlesh, a 27-year-old machine operator explained to me that while the BMS leaders had asked the workers to refrain from going on strike as a form of *balidan*, for him, protesting the dismissal of his fellow contract workers, even if they weren't members of

[49] BMS Worker Education Workshop, 10-11 June 2016, Dada Bhagan Ashram, Adalaj, Gujarat.

the BMS, was his own form of *tyag* and *tapasya*: going on strike meant sacrificing wages, but it was to stand up against the injustices committed by the factory owners.

As we shall see in the next section, contract workers have become a key node of tension in the Hindu right's hegemonic project in Gujarat and showcase an important contradiction in the exercise of right-wing power.

BMS leaders thus find themselves in an uneasy situation in the maintenance phase of hegemony in Gujarat. While Modi would have likely wished to destroy the BMS he instead restricted its focus on keeping a lid on class conflict in the high-profit manufacturing sector. The BMS's membership base is smaller in number here, but potentially more volatile. When conflicts arise, there is more at stake in resolving them without major disruptions to production. Other BMS leaders who wish to expand the union's base beyond the formal manufacturing sector are discouraged from doing so. One leader who accompanied me to a meeting of the tribal workers' wing of the BMS, the Vanvasi Mazdoor Sangh, in the neighboring state of Madhya Pradesh admitted that he came in secret since his earlier endeavors to initiate unionizing efforts in Gujarat's economically depressed tribal region was discouraged by top BMS leaders in the state.[50]

[50] 8 January 2017, Ratlam, Madhya Pradesh.

At the same time, there are some senior BMS leaders who remain committed to the union's task of inculcating Hindu nationalism among the rank-and-file. They believe that it is their "moral duty to show workers the ways of the RSS" [51], but since they wield Hindu nationalism mostly as a force for discipline, workers are loath to accept it. One afternoon before a meeting in Vadodara, Keshavlal Thakkar, a well-respected veteran of the BMS and the RSS, muttered under his breath "You see, these workers do not come from the RSS, so that discipline is not there" as he began arranging the mess of shoes that had piled up in the doorway in front of the meeting hall. Some workers who were uncomfortable at the sight of such an esteemed elderly man touching their shoes quickly came to Thakkar's aid, but this did little to change their views on the RSS.

Some BMS *pratinidhi* dismissed the Hindu nationalist slogans of the BMS as "*kitabi baatein*" (bookish talk), "well and good in theory" but not enough to ensure that workers are adequately compensated for their contributions.[52] At a two-day worker education meeting organized by the BMS state executive in June 2016, several of the *pratinidhi* who were invited to attend because they apparently demonstrated the potential to become patriotic Hindu nationalist labor leaders, instead complained that no amount of shouting "*Bharat Mata ki Jai*" [Long live Mother India!] would protect them from the pressures they faced on the shopfloor or abuses from their managers. They wished that they BMS

[51] Interview, 13 April 2016, Vadodara, Gujarat.
[52] Interview, 7 May 2016, Vadodara, Gujarat.

had organized sessions on practical matters, such as navigating labor legislation, rather than the repetitive nationalist slogan shouting and history lessons they received over the two days.[53]

In fact, most of the BMS members I met in Gujarat were aware of the RSS but had little to say about the organization beyond identifying it as an advocacy group for Hindu interests. When BMS members did engage with the RSS, they did so dispassionately. "What's RSS?" one BMS member asked me mischievously. "I know RS [Royal Stag, a local Indian whiskey brand] but who cares about the RSS?" The BMS rank-and-file in Gujarat differed markedly from the workers in Kerala who were either steeped in the Sangh Parivar since childhood, or whose membership in the BMS had made them more receptive to becoming Sanghis (see Chapter 3). Other workers were more instrumental. After a chance encounter with local RSS *swayamsevaks* during an interview, the two BMS rank-and-file members who had accompanied me to the meeting wanted to purchase a saffron flag, a common RSS insignia, to put on their motorcycles. Knowing that these workers were not RSS members, I asked them what motivated their desire to represent the organization. "Oh, it's simple, we won't be bothered by the traffic cops" one of the workers told me matter-of-factly. Other BMS members revealed similar motivations: "Local *goondas* [thugs] don't mess around with us once they notice this flag" explained another worker I met at a chai stall outside of the Apollo factory gates.

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[53] BMS Worker Education Workshop, 10-11 June 2016, Dada Bhagwan Ashram, Adalaj, Gujarat.

BMS members like Ganubhai are far from being the most deprived sections of the working class in Gujarat, but this is precisely why their insecurities around living standards may be particularly explosive politically. Their concerns suggest that there is a widespread insecurity among the less privileged workers who make up the majority of the BJP's working-class supporters. Modi's totalitarian policy allowed him to maintain some semblance of a stable hold on power, but it is today confronting contradictions that are becoming increasingly difficult to resolve. The BJP could not destroy the BMS, but instead relegated it to a repressive role of disciplining workers, which makes it difficult for the union to harness the power of labor as a way of supporting Hindu nationalist hegemony. The BMS is having difficulty convincing its *pratinidhi*, let alone the rest of the mass of its membership at the rank-and-file level, that Hindu nationalism can serve as a universal plane on which their struggles can be waged, and their interests met. The case of the RR Kabel workers discussed in the following section further illustrates the class tensions that are making it difficult to maintain right-wing hegemony in Gujarat.

The Case of RR Kabel and the internalization of class conflict

The class tensions that have been simmering under the surface since the transition to the maintenance phase of hegemony in the mid 1990s, have become more palpable in Gujarat today. The case of the Ram Ratna Kabel (RR Kabel) factory highlights how the Hindu right in some sense has become a victim of its own success in building hegemony. It epitomizes the "in-house" representation of labor and capital within the Sangh Parivar in

Gujarat and thus demonstrates how the internalization of class conflict can weaken hegemonic projects.

RR Kabel is an Indian multinational corporation producing a number of electrical products, including switches, copper cables, and enameled wires. It was established in 1998 as part of the RR Group. The Group's founders, the Kabra family, belong to an upper-caste mercantile community known as Maheshwari.[54] The patron of the Kabra family, Rameshwarlal Kabra, along with several of his progeny who hold executive positions at RR Group are influential patrons of the RSS. The Kabra's regularly enjoy the private audience of the RSS's chief, Mohan Bhagwat. One of the RR Group's more public display of its Hindu nationalist commitments is "Mission RRoshni." Mission RRoshni works alongside two of the RSS's largest social initiatives, the "Friends of Tribals" Society, which works to improve tribal welfare by improving literacy and health in rural India, and Ekal Vidyalaya, which is also involved in education and development in rural areas of India and Nepal. Mission RRoshni also engages in the provision of disaster relief. In 2018, Rameshwarlal Kabra received the Padma Shri, a highly ranked civilian award from the Government of India, for his work in rural and tribal development.

[54] Another notable elite Maheshwaris is the mega-wealthy Birla industrial family.

RR Kabel opened its factory in Wagodhia village in 2010. This was a moment when Modi was active in his grand seduction of capitalist investment to Gujarat. RR Kabel is located in close proximity to the BMS's other major units in the Wagodhia industrial hub, which lies twenty kilometers outside of Vadodara. In 2014, a small group of workers decided that they needed to form a union to protect themselves against the precarious conditions of work, long shifts, and other excesses of the RR Kabel management towards workers. Workers were hired on fixed-term contracts with the promise of being made permanent but were beginning to worry that this would go unfulfilled if they did not unionize.

Many of the RR Kabel workers had close friendships and familial ties with workers from the other major BMS units in Wagodhia, most notably Apollo Tyres and Munjal Auto Parts. It was because of these personal ties with other BMS members that RR Kabel workers approached the Hindu nationalist union. The small group of workers who initiated the unionizing efforts in 2014 were motivated by the BMS's reputation for honesty and the gains it had secured for other workers in the area.[55]

[55] The workers had also contacted a leftist labor organizer who works with the New Trade Union Initiative (NTUI), a politically unaffiliated national labor federation, but were discouraged because the union leader was difficult to reach

The common link with the RSS was not a motivating factor for workers. It also did little to assuage the concerns of the RR Kabel owners who were reluctant to recognize the BMS. The RR Kabel workers who initiated the unionizing process faced intimidation from managers, including threats to be transferred to RR Kabel's factory in the neighboring territory of Daman and Diu, as well as bullying by local police. RR Kabel was not the only factory that was reluctant to welcome the BMS. As we saw above, in 2012, the workers at Apollo Tyres who were trying to unionize with the BMS also faced opposition from the management but were able to win recognition after going on strike. It is worth noting that for all the accusations levied at the BMS for its apparent subservience to the dictates of the BJP and capital, in the eyes of capitalists in Gujarat—even those like the Kabras who have the RSS's disciplining force at the ready – the BMS can nevertheless appear threatening.

At RR Kabel the BMS was eventually recognized in after the union's senior leadership had closed-door negotiations with the company's executives. Workers reported that once they unionized with the BMS, there was a noticeable improvement in the working conditions at the factory.[56] Yet, this was short-lived. In 2015, Rama Shankar Singh, 27, one of the leaders in the unionizing effort and a main target of intimidation during the campaign to bring the BMS to the factory, was suspended after he intervened in an issue involving contract workers. While there was a first crop of workers who had been

[56] Interview, 19 May 2016, Wagodhia, Gujarat.

transferred to permanent work contracts after the BMS came to the factory, RR Kabel continued its practice of hiring workers on fixed-term contracts. Nearly half of the shopfloor was made up of contract labor. According to provisions in the Contract Labor (Regulation and Abolition) Act, however, employers are mandated to make workers permanent if they are providing labor that is essential for production for at least 240 consecutive days. The RR Kabel management had cancelled the workers' original contract, which was approaching the 240-day limit, and transferred them to another contract held by an external labor subcontractor.

Rama and other *pratinidhi* took up the issue of the contract workers. Nearly 120 workers whose terms of employment had just been terminated had earlier signed up to join the BMS. Rama was warned by the management to stay out of matters involving contract workers, but he insisted, "those are our boys too.'" Rama suspected that RR Kabel wanted to prevent the contract workers from joining the union and this is why they tried to put them on a new contract. Rama was suspended for nine months after the company accused him of destroying materials in the factory and charged him with bullying contract workers. An inquiry into the matter found absolved Rama of the charges and he was reinstated at work.

In April 2016, when I first met the *pratinidhi* of RR Kabel at a district level meeting of the BMS in Vadodara, they were in the middle of wage negotiations and had grown frustrated with how slowly both the management and the BMS were moving on the settlement. The *pratindhi* of RR Kabel had long felt that they needed to go on strike to

precipitate the settlement of their wage negotiations, but when they came to the BMS office for support, they were hard pressed to find it. After months of being dissuaded by senior BMS leaders, RR Kabel workers began to more strongly insist that a strike was necessary, if anything to ward off what they described to be a situation of impending mutiny by the rest of the BMS rank-and-file.

The BMS *pratinidhi* started to organize regular meetings in the absence of the BMS leadership in an effort to take matters into their own hands. They had difficulty reassuring the angry workers who were quickly losing confidence and patience in their leaders. Several RR Kabel workers had begun to suspect that the BMS stood no chance against the Kabra's tight connection with the RSS. "Hussainbhai is probably getting *ghoos* [bribes] from the management, and that's why he's just been stringing us along for all these years" said Adhikar Patil, a 32-year-old machine operator and BMS member.[57]

This invoked an even stronger belief among some *pratinidhi* that a strike was the only way to move forward. Govind Parmar, a BMS *pratinidhi* who was the only lower caste member of the group, reasoned out loud in the BMS office:

> There's a saying in Gujarati, that if a dog bites you, you have to bite back. This is how it is with our bosses. They think that now that the BMS has come in, these

[57] Interview, 15 June 2016, Wagodhia, Gujarat

guys are never going to go on strike. This is why we have no choice but to go on strike. [58]

Hearing this, the usually slumbering BMS leaders turned into stern disciplinarians. The *kala haath* [black hand] perspective that had given Baskarbhai an intimate understanding of the plight of workers became tightly wounded fists that pounded the table as he roared at workers "We are civilized human beings, not animals!" His moustache was quivering as he wiped the beads of sweat off the side of his face. The workers' insistence to go on strike had offended Baskarbhai's Hindu nationalist sentiments. "We work for the nation! Not just to fill our bellies!" he yelled at the *pratinidhi* who were stunned into silence.

The *pratinidhi* obliged their leaders temporarily. At the end of October 2016, the workers at RR Kabel staged an affront to the company by refusing to take the box of sweets offered as a gift for the important Hindu religious festival of Diwali. This was a particularly clever form of subversion considering the religiosity of the RR Kabel owners, but it was even more remarkable (and threatening) because of the display of shopfloor solidarity between contract and permanent workers. After the Diwali sweets protest, knowing they had the full backing of contract workers, the *pratinidhi* decided to stage a one-day wild cat strike in early November 2016. In retaliation, RR Kabel fired one hundred contract workers. The *pratindhi* were resolute on gaining support from their

[58] BMS office visit, 5 November 2016, Vadodara, Gujarat

leaders to organize an even bigger strike to protest the dismissal of the contract workers. The BMS's erstwhile tire-slashing militant, Hussainbhai Solanki, was livid that the *pratinidhi* had defied union orders and struck work. Unlike Baskarbhai's attempt at patriotic persuasion, Hussainbhai opted for a more pragmatic persuasion that emphasized the loss of income and the potential embittering of relations with management that workers would have to shoulder if they strike work.

> I won't force you, but I am asking you firmly, please keep the factory running… You guys aren't listening to the union and you're not listening to me. You come here and pressure us. You think its fun to go on strike? You think you're going to win some big wins? It's you that will be at a lost. It's from your pocket that the money will disappear, not mine.[59]

Yet, in his pleading with workers to abandon their strike plans, Hussainbhai also revealed the power of workers over the union leaders, namely that workers had the capacity to "pressure" the BMS leaders to bend to their will. It was in this moment that Hussainbhai divulged the details of his militant past in a somewhat desperate attempt to restore some legitimacy in the eyes of the *pratinidhi*.

During the strike, the workers of RR Kabel discovered the limits of the RSS's professed commitment to egalitarianism across Sangh organizations. On the eve of the strike, as

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[59] BMS office visit, 5 November 2016, Vadodara, Gujarat

workers were clearing the grounds for the picket in front of the Ram Ratna factory gates, a local RSS leader arrived in a chauffeured vehicle along with the labor contractor who supplied temporary workers to Ram Ratna. “Don’t mess with the contract boys for a little while longer” he appealed firmly to the *pratinidhi*. “After that, if the management doesn’t budge, I’ll personally make sure that you guys win” he said.

The man, Bharat Sinh Solanki, was the 42-year-old head of the RSS in Wagodhia village, the industrial hinterland in which the BMS’s major units in Vadodara district were located, and the principal of the local elementary school. Solanki was an esteemed local figure, including among a handful of local RR Kabel workers who lived in Wagodhia. His reputation was built on an uncomfortable mix of tales of heroism that included saving children from drowning in wells to his unflinching readiness to mete out violence against Muslims. In April 2017, Solanki, along with other local Sangh Parivar outfits like the VHP and the militant youth group, the Bajrang Dal, had organized a Virat Hindu Sammelan.[60] The event brought together local religious notables and leaders of Sangh organizations to stoke Hindu nationalist fervor among the residents of Wagodhia village around the construction of a Hindu temple on the grounds of the Babri Masjid. It was not well attended by the BMS, save for a small group of workers who lived in the village. As we waited in line for dinner together, they marveled at the site of Solanki, who despite his

[60] Unlike the RSS events in Kerala, in Gujarat, the BMS’s senior leadership was absent and I gathered that no more than a dozen BMS members were present at the event.

status and power, was also waiting in line for his dinner just like the rest of us attendees. "Even at the school, I heard he gets up to make his own chai" one of the workers chimed.

Emergent counter-hegemonic challenges to right-wing hegemony

Yet, for all his unpretentiousness, Solanki had in fact failed to uphold his end of the bargain he had struck with the BMS *pratinidhi* during their strike a few months earlier. The BMS's belief in the RSS was betrayed. In response, some members of the BMS *pratinidhi* sought help from the Bhilistan Tiger Sena (BTS). The BTS offered the RR Kabel workers the counterweight to their employers which they could not find in the BMS or in the RSS.

The BTS is the inverse image of the RSS and was described as such by its adherents. The BTS was formed by a local politician and *adivasi* (tribal) leader, Chotubhai Vasava. Vasava, a well-known leader of the Bhil tribal group, was the sole representative in Gujarat of the Janata Dal (United) Party, a center-left party that is strong in the eastern state of Bihar. Vasava left the Janata Dal in 2018 after it allied with the BJP in Bihar in 2017. He established the Bharatiya Tribal Party (BTP) and the BTS became its extra-parliamentary wing. Vasava has been a vocal advocate of a movement for the establishment of a separate state, Bhilistan for the last three decades. The movement is well supported by the Bhils, who are classified as a scheduled tribe (ST). The movement for Bhilistan also includes other oppressed groups, like Muslims and Dalits.

The BTS was an attractive option for the workers at Ram Ratna because many of the contract workers who were dismissed were *adivasi* or Muslim. Moreover, unlike the BMS leaders who were wary of supporting the workers strike, the BTS did not shy away from militancy. When the group of dismissed contract workers arrived at the BTS office in Wagodhia, their leader, a young Muslim man by the name of Shahidbhai, bluntly told the workers, "We don't spend time on chit-chat, we move straight to *mar-peet* (fighting)".[61] A few days later, Shahidbhai made his appearance at the Ram Ratna picket with a cabal of BTS militants. Workers were excited about their arrival. The group didn't come empty handed, but rather than the stones and bats they offered to use against the RR management, they came armed with hot samosas and chai for the striking workers.

The BTS's show of support was perhaps more spectacle than the beginnings of a sustained commitment to organizing workers, but it nevertheless reveals an important fissure in Hindu right-wing hegemony in Gujarat. With BMS workers looking for support outside of the Sangh Parivar, clearly Hindu nationalism's universal plane is not able to provide the basis for inter-class unity among Hindus. Moreover, the BMS workers went to the BTS, a group whose political ideology is diametrically opposed to the political project of Hindu nationalism since it explicitly organizes those groups who are either excluded or marginalized by the Hindu right-wing. They counter the right-wing construction of the Hindu national identity with the notion of the Mulnivasi, an

[61] BTS office, Wagodhia, Gujarat, 10 November 2016

indigenous identity group which includes Adivasi, Dalits, and Muslims. While its standing in Gujarat remains marginal, the BTS nevertheless has the attention of the RSS, suggesting that the Hindu right-wing is closely monitoring potential threats to its power. In fact, the Virat Hindu Samhelan organized in April 2017 was in response to a ten-day long procession organized by the BTS to promote minority rights that began on the birth anniversary of Dalit leader, Bhimrao Ambedkar earlier that month.

Conclusion

By centralizing power in 2001, Modi was able to quell some oppositions within the ranks of the Sangh Parivar and even within his own party. His totalitarian approach placed the BJP at the center of the Sangh Parivar and subordinated the party's civil society supports. As the flare-ups of labor unrest in the later part of Modi's time as Chief Minister of Gujarat revealed, maintaining the consent of workers could not be taken for granted. In this case, while Modi might have wanted to break ties completely with the BMS and render it irrelevant, it was not possible to do so. Instead, the BMS is constrained in its activities which are limited to ensuring that class conflicts in the most strategic sectors of the economy do not cause major disruptions to economic production. Thus, in the maintenance phase of hegemony, the BMS is given the difficult task of ensuring that periodic flare-ups of workers' discontent can escape, but without igniting a larger fire that could burn the legitimacy of the BJP's hold on state power.

Yet, this task is becoming increasingly difficult as even the relatively well to do workers who are unionized with the BMS and elevated to *pratinidhi* status, are finding it difficult

to hold on to the ostentatious promises of development made by the BJP. While the totalitarian takeover of the BJP put Modi more in control of the right-wing hegemonic bloc, it also had the effect of reducing the entire apparatus of Hindu nationalist hegemony, which was spread across several organizations working in different areas of civil society, to the more singular and unstable form of the BJP's grasp on state power.

The impulse to secure material conditions that drove Majmudar and Joshi and others at IPCL to fight against disinvestment have only grown stronger as workers today face increasingly precarious working conditions and find it harder to achieve the standards of living that were promised to them by Modi. While the IPCL workers could still turn to the BMS to validate their struggles, however partially, today, BMS members have a difficult time finding support from their union leaders.

Moreover, the growing number of contract workers on the shopfloor make the BMS's task of containing conflict even more difficult. With even the relatively privileged section of the Gujarati working class, represented in the *pratinidhi* of the BMS, have grown increasingly restive as they struggle to attain a stable hold on the flashy but elusive promises of development made by the BJP. "There's no such thing as *sabka saath, sabke vikas* [with everyone's support, everyone's development]. It's not here in Gujarat, and it's not happening anywhere else. What we need is that development is inclusive, but

nothing like that is happening in India."[62] These were the words of Rama Shankar – an upper caste, well-educated Hindu worker and BMS *pratinidhi*. They resonated closely with the views of several Muslim contract workers who were dismissed from RR Kabel, who like Rama, felt dejected when I asked them about their experience of the famed Gujarat model of development that propelled Modi to make his claims of inclusive and participatory development at the national level. While these workers had no place in the BMS, they nevertheless found themselves alongside even the most privileged BMS members at the RR Kabel picket line.

Such displays of solidarity between permanent and contract workers have been a key feature in some of the most explosive labor struggles seen in India in the 21st century. They are particularly problematic for the Hindu right as it is becoming increasingly difficult for actors like the BMS to uphold the boundaries that separate Hindu workers from Muslim workers. In the case of RR Kabel, despite the owners' initial reluctance to hire Muslim contract workers due to their ideological support of Hindu nationalism, eventually they abandoned this position. During the strike, there was a moment of solidarity across the contract-permanent divide since many of the contract workers were Muslim and the majority of the permanent workers were Hindu. Unable to find adequate support from the BMS, the workers turned to the nascent counter-hegemonic forces in Gujarat for support.

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[62] Interview, 17 June 2016. Wagodhia, Gujarat

While the capture of state power is critical for advancing in the process of hegemonic consolidation, as Gramsci reminds us, a fully hegemonic ideology is not carried through a single party, but instead is suspended in the molecules of political and civil society no matter which party is in power. In fact, once the party fulfills its role of coordinating interests, there is a demand of martyrdom of sorts placed on the party. "The single party must recede, leaving a realm of pluralistic competition … for consolidated hegemony requires political pluralism" (Riley 2015:182). It is the BJP's failure to commit its own "*tyag, tapasya, aur balidan*" (sacrifice and selflessness), as the BMS might suggest, in Gujarat that has made it a site of advanced, but ultimately unstable and unconsolidated right-wing hegemony. Perhaps Modi's totalitarian takeover of the BJP, first in Gujarat and now at the national level, is preparing the grounds for an eventual sacrifice of the party, but this seems unlikely. In Kerala, however, the continued expansion of the BMS in the realm of the labor movement even if the BJP doesn't capture state power, may lead to a more stable, but incomplete hegemony.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Summary of Argument

Building Hindu nationalist hegemony

At the national level, communism and capitalism played an important role in shaping the Hindu nationalist hegemonic project. The threat of communism in the mid 20th century in particular was a major propelling force for activist RSS cadre who wanted to elevate Hindu nationalism from a transformative project at the individual-level to a larger and more ambitious project at the society-level. To effect this change, these RSS activists believed that it was necessary to organize groups to support Hindu nationalism, and for this it was necessary to reorganize groups who were already organized by Communists. One of these activists, Dattopant Thengadi, founded the BMS in 1955. Several other major Hindu nationalist outfits were formed around this time and gave rise to the Sangh Parivar. This family of Hindu nationalist organizations has been instrumental in driving the process of right-wing hegemonic consolidation in India.

The building phase of Hindu nationalist hegemony thus takes off in the latter part of the 20th century. During this phase, the BMS's founders developed ideological infrastructure to support the articulated identity of the Hindu nationalist-citizen worker. They drew on Hindu symbolism, imagery, and religious concepts of sacrifice (*tyag* and *balidan*) selflessness (*tapasya*), and the notion of national development as a sacred calling as a way of enlisting the dutiful and disciplined participation of its members to capitalist development. Despite its unabashedly Hindu tones and allegiances, the BMS established itself as an organization open to workers of all religious backgrounds so long as they

recognize their common *Hindutva* origins. The notion of *Hindutva*, or an essential "Hinduness" defined by common geographic and ethnic origins, offered the BMS as well as the rest of the Sangh Parivar a way to claim inclusivity. In the case of the BMS, this meant that workers of different religious communities would be welcomed to join the union as long as they (eventually) identify with their Hindutva identity.

In practice, however, despite the efforts to distinguish itself from its opponents, the BMS often found itself compromising its ideological commitments. At the national level, the BMS attempted alliances with other leftist as well as center-left unions. On the ground, BMS leaders militantly organized workers in defiance of the union's ideological rejection of class struggle. I demonstrated that this feature is common to BMS strategies during the building phase of hegemonic consolidation in very different state contexts. In both Kerala, which has a strong tradition of militant labor movements, and in Gujarat, which has a strong tradition of conciliatory labor movements, BMS leaders both past and present organize strikes and other forms of collective disruptive action. I found that BMS leaders in both state contexts did not approach the task of mobilizing support from workers with their saffron guns blazing, but rather emphasized the class and material interests of the workers they were targeting.

I demonstrated that in both Kerala and Gujarat, these workers tended to be predominately Hindu because Muslims were already excluded from the spaces of the labor movement by other forces and dynamics. In Kerala, Muslims were not one of the major constituents of the Left's hegemony-building phase, which was led by the Communist parties of India.

The Communists in Kerala focused their attention primarily on the Hindu Ezhava caste group, which is the largest single caste in the state. The political alienation of Muslims by the Communist party deserves further exploration. It is notable that while the political pursuit of Ezhava support by Communists is understandable given the size of the caste group, Muslims also constitute a significant share (close to a quarter) of the state's population. While the nascent bonds between Muslim peasants and leftist political forces were nipped in the bud in the early 20th century, the question remains as to why these bonds were not rekindled or in the case that such a rekindling has been attempted, why it has failed. This is an especially pertinent question given that the inroads the Hindu right-wing is making in Kerala through the BMS is tapping into the associational power of workers. Since the BMS's work of building hegemony entails reorganizing existing organizations by drawing boundaries that are in line with the right's ideology, in Kerala, this work has been done for them by the Communist Party.

In Gujarat, while Muslims were courted by the Congress, which dominated the parliamentary arena during the Hindu nationalism's building phase in that state, the political bonds remained shallow and were fragile especially in the face of the Hindu right's growing presence. In Gujarat, as the Hindu right sought to carve out support among workers, they did face a religiously diverse workforce in sectors like the textile industry. During the building phase of Hindu right-wing hegemony in this state, the textile industry was declining, and different Sangh Parivar organizations made in roads among Hindus by violently antagonizing Muslim textile workers. The BMS, however,

had its sights set on emerging industries, such as the chemical and petrochemical sector and heavy manufacturing industries where they faced a predominately Hindu workforce.

The biggest challenge for the BMS in the building phase of hegemony in Gujarat was not the Muslim population, but rather came from within the Sangh Parivar. Affinities between the RSS and local industrialists in Gujarat placed the BMS more in the margins of the right's hegemonic bloc. The BMS received less support from the RSS, even in the building phase, and relied on individual union leaders who were well-steeped in the RSS tradition to produce the articulated identity of the Hindu national citizen-worker. In Kerala, the BMS has the full support of all Sangh Parivar organizations working in the state in producing the articulated identity of the Hindu nationalist citizen-worker. While the building phase in Kerala is ongoing, I have argued that this institutionally supported articulation has the potential to secure consent of workers to Hindu nationalism in a more stable way than in Gujarat.

Maintaining Hindu nationalist hegemony

At the national level, the BMS and the rest of the Sangh Parivar gained power throughout the end of the 20th century and transitioned from building to maintaining hegemony in the late 1990s when the BJP first won state power nationally. At this time, the BMS had become the largest labor union in India, representing one-in-four Indian workers who were unionized with one of the major national-level union federations.

The BMS's relationship with the ruling BJP was strained in the transition to maintaining hegemony and has since become even more contentious. In the transition period of the 1980s and early 1990s, the BMS had been supportive of the Sangh's decision to focus on cultural mobilization through its religious wing, the VHP. The BMS helped facilitate the large-scale national campaign for the destruction of the Babri Mosque, even though this meant it could not access the human resources offered by the Sangh for its own activities and plans for expansion. When the religious campaigning had died down, the BMS took up the fight against economic liberalization, which had been initiated by a Congress-ruled government in 1991. While the BJP had initially joined the chorus of voices within the Sangh that decried the plans to reform India's economy, it quickly recanted. When the party that the BMS had helped to catapult into state power took the reins in 1999, instead of finding an ally at the head of the Indian state, the BMS found in the ruling BJP one of the biggest obstacles thwarting its resistance to India's new economic orientation.

On the ground, observing the maintenance phase of hegemonic consolidation in Gujarat reveals that the BMS has become a more regressive and constrained version of its former self. I argued that this transformation in the BMS's orientation is the result of the BJP, especially under the totalitarian leadership of Narendra Modi, actively marginalizing the BMS in Gujarat. BMS leaders who were fervid militants during the building phase of hegemony and even mobilized Hindu nationalist ideology as a way to justify strikes have now become more rigid disciplinarians and use Hindu nationalism to dissuade their members from disrupting economic production. In the maintenance phase, BMS leaders are tasked with the goal of delivering well-behaved inputs in production rather than its

original, integral aim of producing empowered and disciplined Hindu nationalist citizen-workers. BMS leaders are discouraged from organizing workers outside of the numerically small population of manufacturing workers who are employed in industries that the state has deemed to be strategic for Gujarat's economic growth. BMS leaders who wish to organize tribal workers in Gujarat's tribal belt are not supported by the highest rank of BMS officials.

Their members, on the other hand, are growing increasingly restive, especially in the high-profit manufacturing sector where the BMS has its most important base. These workers struggle with mounting production pressures and difficult working conditions, but the thorniest issue for the BMS, is the growing cost of living which is making life difficult for even the relatively well-heeled sections of the working class it represents. Despite the BJP's ostentatious claims of growth and development in Gujarat, workers have not been able to secure their standards of living. As a result, there is a sense of disillusionment among many BMS members.

The BMS thus finds itself in a difficult predicament in the advanced phases of the Hindu right's hegemony. The BJP, especially under Modi, has relegated the union to the unfriendly role of disciplinarian while the party has taken the place of the union as the broker of labor's development through Modi's tall claims of widespread prosperity in the state at the hands of a booming manufacturing sector and low unemployment rates (see Table 1). This has made the work of the BMS even harder since the workers they have organized remain strategic for economic growth and for the BJP's popularity in Gujarat,

but also nationally since Modi's popularity at the national level was so closely linked to his governance of Gujarat. The BMS's leaders attempts to keep a lid on class conflict are being resisted by its members, who in turn show some interest in the beckoning of emergent counter-hegemonic forces that are seeking to establish power through a subaltern coalition of tribal groups, lower caste Hindus, and Muslims. The BMS is also unable to turn to the rest of the Sangh Parivar for support in their efforts to counter the counter-hegemons since the RSS's presence is fading among both BMS leaders and the rank-and-file.

In the maintenance phase of Hindu nationalist hegemonic consolidation, the BMS is not the only member of the Sangh facing difficulty. The BJP's work in maintaining hegemony is also more demanding in this phase compared to the building phase. Not only does the right-wing inherit the responsibility of ensuring economic growth in this period, but it also inherits the task of reconciling the different interests within the hegemonic bloc with the interests of the ruling party. At the head of the state, the BJP is tasked with seeing through the "historic task" of instituting Hindu nationalism in civil and political society. This demands a certain coherence between the BJP and the different civil society supports that helped to build its power. Modi attempted to achieve this coherence through his totalitarian take-over of the party which has entailed cutting ties with the Sangh's civil society allies like the BMS. Modi's take over might have allowed him to strengthen his grip on the state, but the outcome for Hindu nationalist hegemony is ultimately less stable. Thus, right-wing hegemony is much harder to maintain than it is to build. In the remaining sections of this concluding chapter, I will elaborate the future

directions for research and the larger implications for a sociological understanding of right-wing power based on the findings I have presented in this dissertation.

Larger Implications and Future Directions for Research

The Indian case has revealed the importance of a historical perspective in order for us to understand the consolidation of hegemony as a process that is riddled with tensions even as power is becoming increasingly solidified in the hands of the hegemonic bloc. This suggests that there is a fragility to right-wing power, but one that can be vigorously enforced and guarded especially when the right can access the state's monopoly on violence even if hegemony is not fully consolidated. Thus, we must pay attention to both the class fissures that signal points of tension and could destabilize right-wing power, as well as to the desperate and strong-armed attempts to contain the instability. To better understand the nodes of instability in the right's hegemonic project, further research should unearth the role of religion in the Hindu nationalist project, especially in the ways that boundaries are drawn between "included" and "excluded" groups.

Further unearthing the role of religion in Hindu right-wing boundary drawing

We might see the BMS's work within the Hindu right as a way of providing a sort of "public and psychological wage premium" to Hindu workers (Du Bois 1998:700). To borrow from Roediger (2007), another scholar deeply inspired by Du Bois, a future task for research may be specified as developing a more concrete sense of the "wages of Hinduness" that the BMS offers Indian workers. In other words, we still need to unpack the way that Hinduness is upheld as the default identity of a religiously diverse Indian

working class. This default of the Indian worker as the Hindu worker is what allows the Sangh Parivar organizations to peddle dubious claims of religious inclusivity without completely losing its legitimacy within an ostensibly secular Indian labor movement. How do we understand the stability of right-wing political projects that attempt to unify support under the banner of a majoritarian and monolithic religious identity? To answer this question, it is especially urgent for future work to remedy the dearth of sociological investigation into Indian Muslims in a way that also addresses the theoretical imperative of examining questions of class and the politics of redistribution alongside questions of identity and the politics of representation and recognition (Ahmad 1972; Fazalbhoy 1997, 2005).

This dissertation has also suggested that there is an important dialectic between established and emergent hegemonic projects that can shed light on how political power transforms and is transformed over time. If dismantling existing hegemonies entails tackling them on their own terms, how do we then understand the role of groups that are excluded from the hegemonic terrain to begin with? In Kerala, BMS leaders appeal to workers from lower caste backgrounds using symbolism and narratives from Bhakti traditions of Hinduism, which emphasize universal brotherhood and religious equality. This is in contrast to the more elitist, upper caste (Brahmanical) religious traditions espoused by BMS leaders in Gujarat and by the executive leadership of the Hindu nationalist movement at the national level. Interestingly, the Hindu right-wing's embrace of Bhakti traditions in Kerala have inspired Communists to attempt their own

articulations of Hindu religious and class identities as a way of countering the growing presence of the BMS among workers in that state.

Religion also plays a contradictory role in the right-wing's hegemonic project in another way. I demonstrated that Hindu ideals of sacrifice (*tyag* or *balidan*) and selflessness (*tapasya*) figure in the efforts of Hindu nationalist labor leaders to maintain hegemony. At the same time, however, my findings show how BMS workers use the very same Hindu religious narratives of selflessness and sacrifice to justify going on strike or to otherwise subvert the union's attempts at discipline or dissuasion from engaging in collective actions that could disrupt economic production. In response to the coerciveness of their leaders, some BMS members wield the same Hindu religious notions of sacrifice and selflessness to legitimize forming bonds with workers who are excluded from the Hindu nationalist political project. I found emerging forms of Hindu-Muslim solidarity among workers in Gujarat, a state in western India that is considered to be a stronghold of the Hindu right and that has been the site of some of the most violently enforced religious antagonisms in India.

Thus, in the case of Hindu nationalism in India, religion's double-edge can cut both the economic and ideological planes of hegemony. On the economic plane of hegemony, workers use religion to resist the BMS leaders' attempts to coerce them into compliance with economic production. On the ideological plane of hegemony, diverse religious traditions can pose a tension for right-wing leaders who attempt to promote a homogenized version of Hinduism as the basis for Hindu nationalist unity. When and

where do religious narratives and frames strengthen the bonds of solidarity and when do they weaken them, becoming flashpoints for contention? How do we understand the dialectic between the rise of class politics within the religious right and the ascent of religious politics within the secular left? What role do oppositional forces, like leftist movements and parties committed to secularism, play in resisting and reproducing the power of the religious right-wing among workers? How does the complex imbrication between majoritarian religious movements and right-wing political power shape class politics, economic development, and patterns of social inequality and exclusion? Do these dynamics signal an erosion of democracy or could they be reflective of its strengthening due to the diversity of actors that are now paying attention to the economic grievances of workers and the diversity of political idioms in which workers are struggling to better their life chances?

Historicizing right-wing power exposes its potential breadth, but also its limits

This dissertation has demonstrated the importance of historicizing right-wing political power through a theoretical framework that makes distinctions between different phases of hegemonic consolidation. While the comparative angle of this dissertation has been intra-hegemonic, that is comparing different phases of a single hegemonic project, it has also shed light on the inter-linkages between extant and emergent hegemonic forces. In the Indian case, theorizing Hindu nationalism as a hegemonic project constituted through time also reveals a porousness between the right and the left that is particularly striking in the building phase of right-wing hegemony. If the right-wing absorbs some of the lessons

of the left, especially when it comes to building a hegemonic presence among workers, then what does this suggest for political actors that seek to counter the right's hegemony?

Scholars have long suggested that the right-left divisions that have structured political systems and thought in the west are not relevant to understanding politics in many countries outside the west. My findings suggest that rather than questioning the relevance or applicability of the right-left polarity to a certain geographic region, a more analytically fruitful approach may be to historicize the political divide in a way that takes into account the dynamics of articulation, disarticulation, and rearticulation. That is, rather than defining the right-left divide according to political positions on the question of the economy, we can instead examine how the features of the political economy in a given time period interact with the efforts of political actors and social movements in producing political subjectivities. In this endeavor, countries like India, Turkey, Brazil, or South Africa may offer particularly rich insights for a more general understanding of the right's working-class dispensation in other contexts too. The inequality, insecure employment, and widespread impoverishment that have always made questions of poverty alleviation and redistribution a relevant part of a political consensus shared by parties of different ideological stripes, are now also part of the political economic landscape and political discourse in many developed countries as well.

Theorizing right-wing power as a historical process of hegemonic consolidation has also revealed that much of the work of consolidating power occurs in the extra-parliamentary realm. Here, especially in the building phase, the right-wing can act as a creative and

even emancipatory force. In the case of India, often the BMS is able to offer this emancipation to workers without engaging in violence against workers of religious minority groups because these groups have already been antagonized and marginalized by other groups or processes. For good reason, most often studies of right-wing social movements have examined their violent strategies. Yet, the picture of the right's power is not complete without also exploring the "softer", upper part of the right-wing belly.

In the Indian case, the BMS exemplifies this dimension of Hindu right-wing power. While few other countries with ascendant right-wing political parties and leaders can compare to the extent of the Hindu right's reach and its historical levels of coordination in India, civil society is a fertile ground for right-wing organizing even in more diffuse and loosely coordinated forms. It is in civil society and in the "quieter" moments of building hegemony that right-wing actors have more freedom to engage with different groups in different ways that leads to an uneasy mix of empowerment and subordination, and consent and coercion at the hands of the right.

In some sense, understanding the right's presence in civil society is an even more important indicator of the right's potential for consolidating hegemony than the right's presence in the parliamentary arena. In fact, if we were to take Gramsci's writings as a guide for building hegemony, we might see the makings of a more stable right-wing hegemony in Kerala than in Gujarat. Indeed, the longer period of building hegemony in Kerala has allowed the BMS to develop a more extensive and intensive presence among workers in that state than in Gujarat, where the building phase came to an end in the mid

1990s when the BJP captured state power. I have suggested that this may also lead to a more stable, but incomplete or partial right-wing hegemony in Kerala than in Gujarat.

While this can only be determined as history unfolds along its own course, in the meantime, we must not limit our analyses of right-wing power to the spectacular victories or losses of individual right-wing leaders or parties. It is worth quoting Gramsci (1971b:192–93) at length to remind us that vote counts:

> …are simply an instrumental value, giving a measure and a relation and nothing more. And what then is measured? What is measured is precisely the effectiveness, and the expansive and persuasive capacity, of the opinions of a few individuals, the active minorities, the elites, the avant-gardes, etc… Ideas and opinions are not simply "born" in each individual brain: they have had a center of formation, of irradiation, of dissemination, of persuasion—a group of men, or a single individual even, which has developed them and presented them in the political form of current reality. The counting of "votes" is the final ceremony of a long process, in which it is precisely those who devote their best energies to the State and the nation…who carry the greatest weight.

In this dissertation have suggested that the BMS is an important locus from which to observe the Hindu right's "long process" of hegemony building. BMS leaders and the RSS activists who came before them constitute an important "group of men" who have formed, irradiated, disseminated, and tried to persuade tens of millions of Indian workers

of the merits of Hindu nationalism. It is worth locating and examining analogous efforts in other countries where the right's power has been premised on the support of workers.

Figures and Tables

Figure 1 The Sangh Parivar

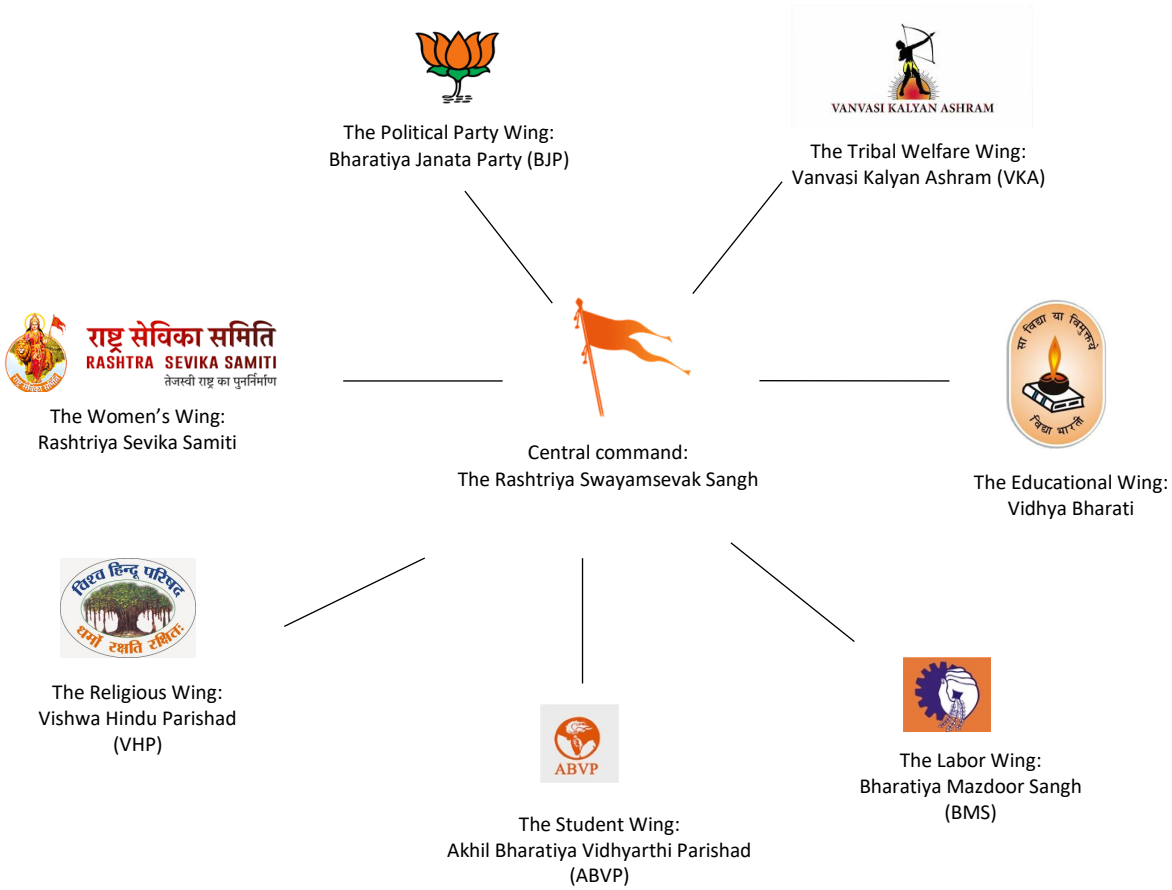
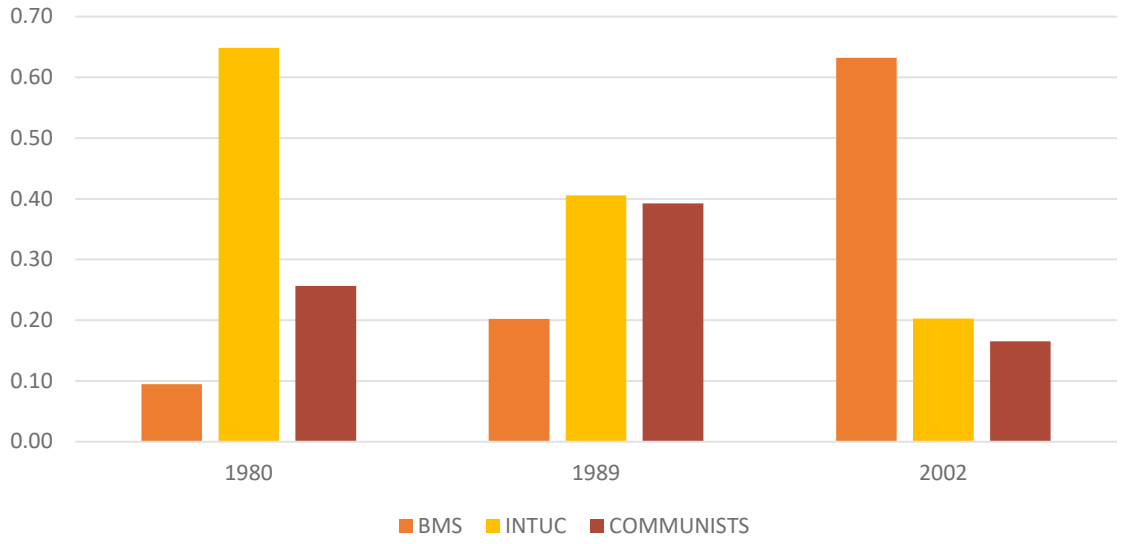
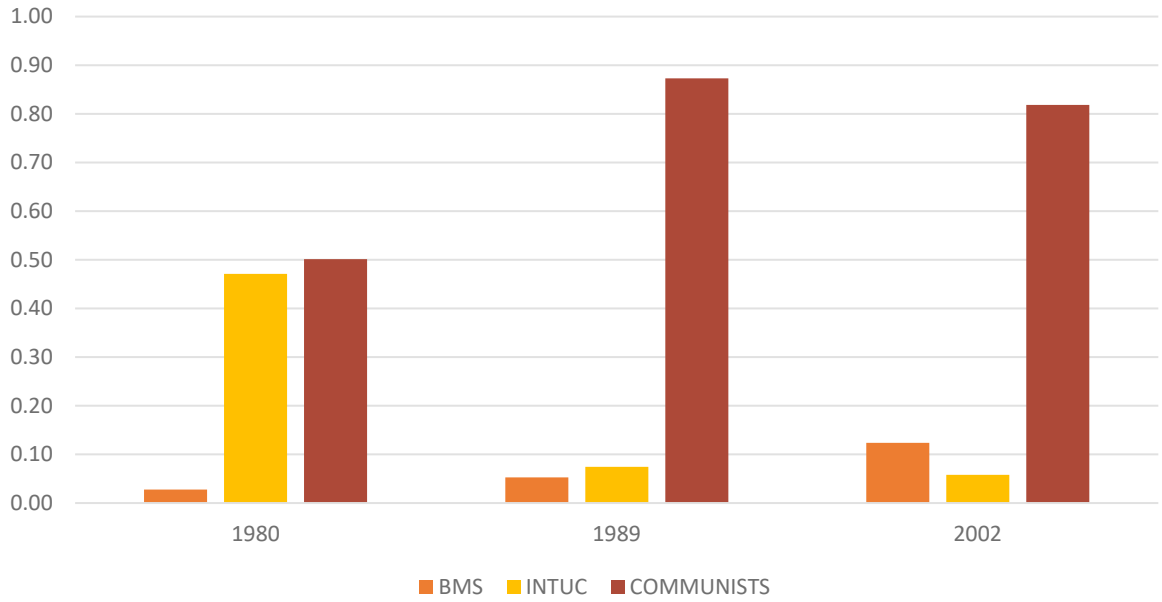


Figure 2 Growth of the BMS in Gujarat (% of total members in major union federations), 1980 to 2002



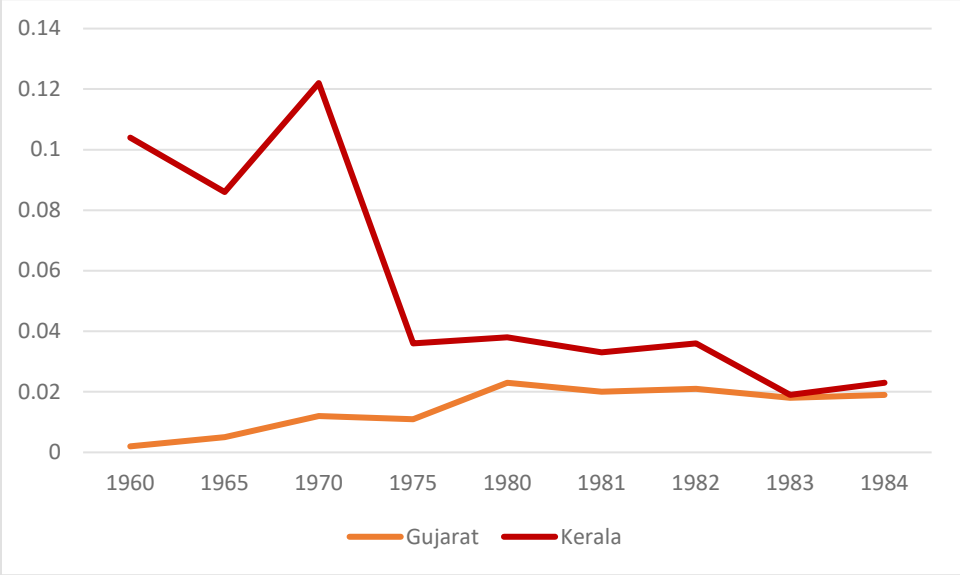
Source: Trade Union Verification (1989, 2002), Select Years

Figure 3 Growth of the BMS in Kerala (% of total members in major union federations), 1980 to 2002



Source: Trade Union Verification (1989, 2002), Select Years

Figure 4 Number of Disputes (per factory) in Gujarat and Kerala during the building phase



Source: Thampy (1990)

Figure 5 The BMS Flag

Photo Credit: Smriti Upadhyay

Figure 6 The BMS Pantheon, Bharat Mata, Vishwakarma, and Dattopant Thengadi

Photo Credit: Smriti Upadhyay

Figure 7 BMS office in Vadodara, Gujarat

Photo Credit: Smriti Upadhyay

Figure 8 BMS offices in Palakkad (L) and Kannur (R), Kerala

Photo Credit: Smriti Upadhyay

Table 1 Socio-economic Characteristics of Gujarat and Kerala

	Gujarat	Kerala	India
Developmental Indicators			
Life Expectancy (2013-2017)	70	75	69
Literacy Rate (%) (2011)	78	94	73
Poverty Head Count Ratio (Total) (2011)	17	7	22
Population (2011) ('000)	60,440	33,406,	1,210,855
Political Economic Indicators			
Net State Domestic Product Per Capita (2019) (INR)	174,652	184,000	114,958
Worker Participation Rate (2018)	47	41	44
Unemployment Rate (2018)	5	11	6
Principle Characteristics of Industrial Sector (per 10,000 persons)			
Number of Factories	0.39	0.22	0.19
Invested Capital	1004	131	290
Workers	18	9	9
Sector-wise Share of Employment (2009-10) (%)			
Agriculture	52	32	52
Manufacturing	14	12	11
Non-Manufacturing	7	16	13
Services	27	39	24
Religious Groups (% of Population) (2001)			
Hindu	89.1	56.2	80.5
General Caste	31.2	22.9	25.9
Other Backward Castes	39.8	56	43
Scheduled Tribes/Scheduled Castes	29	21.1	31.2
Muslims	9.1	24.7	13.4
Other Minority Groups	1.8	19.1	6.1

Source: Development and Political Economic Indicators are from the Economic Survey of India (2019-20) Statistical Appendix, Sector-wise share of employment comes from the Planning Commission; Data on religious groups comes from the Sachar Committee Report (GOI 2006)

Table 2 Union Members (%), Major Labor Union Federations in India (1960 to 2002)

Year	BMS	INTUC	AITUC	CITU
1960	0.15	0.54	0.26	0.00
1963	0.15	0.57	0.23	0.00
1966	0.18	0.60	0.18	0.00
1968	0.18	0.52	0.25	0.00
1980	0.20	0.38	0.06	0.02
1989	0.25	0.22	0.08	0.14
2002	0.25	0.16	0.14	0.11

Source: Srivastava (2001) and Government of India (1989, 2002)

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